



Secrets of a Duke's Heart (Wayward Dukes' Alliance #25)

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Category: Historical

Description: When a wary spinster meets a duke in disguise, their battle of wits turns into a war of hearts.

Cavalier Cove, Cornwall, 1816

Miss Clarissa Penfirth is the quintessential wallflower—quiet, observant, and entirely uninterested in marriage. After years of watching her friends enter disastrous matches, she has no intention of suffering the same fate. Resigned to spinsterhood, she finds comfort in books, long walks by the sea, and avoiding the attention of gentlemen.

During a visit to her cousins estate in Cornwall, she meets Mr. Jude Montague, a man with more secrets than pages in one of her beloved novels. His sharp wit and roguish charm pique her curiosity, but when she discovers that Mr. Montague is no ordinary gentleman, Clarissa is left reeling. Was he toying with her affections, or could his heart truly be hers?

Welcome to Cavalier Cove, where love is as unpredictable as the tides. If you love lighthearted, steamy Regency novellas with attack geese, swoon-worthy dukes, and witty banter, you won't want to miss *Secrets of a Duke's Heart*, a standalone Regency novella with a happy ever after.

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CHAPTER ONE

Miss Clarissa Penfirth was laying on the settee near the fire with her feet tucked up beneath her—a thoroughly undignified, if comfortable posture—reading a treatise on land management when the door to her cousin’s study flew open and hit the wall with a bang. In burst a wild-eyed stranger with tousled sable hair.

“Sir!” she exclaimed, dropping her book face-down into her lap and pressing her hand to her breast. Her heart galloped like a startled horse. The stranger’s gaze slid right past her to where her cousin, Viscount Nathaniel Prescott, was already striding over to them.

“Monty,” he said warmly. “May I introduce Miss Clarissa Penfirth?”

“There is no time for pleasantries,” the intruder declared, casting her a dark look. “Send the lady away. I must have a word with you in private at once.”

Clarissa glared back at him. Dismissive prick. She knew she didn’t possess much in the way of feminine charms, but it was rare that she was ignored outright. Her hair was a shade of deep brown that didn’t exactly inspire poetic odes, her height several inches above average, and her figure on the plump side. Worse, she was wearing her worst dress, the unflattering one perfect for lounging about reading books about improving soil drainage and how to prevent one’s flock of sheep from overgrazing fields.

Still, it wasn’t often she was sent away. Unless one included her extended visit to Viscount Nathaniel Prescott, her cousin and childhood friend. He and her parents had

conspired to get her out of the house and out of public view while her much prettier and younger sisters took their turns making their debuts. No one wanted her hanging about like a spectral spinster of unwedded misfortune.

She wasn't even sure why she cared what this Monty thought of her. He was clearly an arrogant man who was used to issuing orders and getting his way. No one spoke to a viscount that way.

No one ordinary, anyway.

She tilted her head, pondering.

“My niece has been stolen by a pirate!” Monty shouted.

“Don't be silly,” Prescott said. “There are no pirates in Cornwall.”

The glare Mr. Monty leveled at her cousin was so toxic it could have stripped paint off a wall. He fisted his dark hair and tugged, leaving it even wilder than before.

“We do have our fair share of smugglers,” Prescott conceded.

“Smuggler. Pirate. Same difference,” grumbled Mr. Monty. Clarissa refrained from correcting him that there was a technical difference, just as there was a difference between privateers and pirates. Her cousin would chide her for pedantry if she did.

Her lively intelligence was the main reason she had never attracted a proper suitor. Men liked pretty women who listened attentively, laughed at men's jokes no matter how stupid or offensive, and didn't speak. Clarissa had learned the hard way that men did not want a clever woman for a wife.

“When did the kidnapping happen?” she asked briskly.

“Just now. Not half an hour ago. He took her from the Cock and Bull tavern in town. Kidnapped her! Right out from under the noses of the blasted Waterguard!”

“Monty, you’re overwrought.”

“Of course I am overwrought! My niece is missing!” He cast a beseeching look at both of them. “I have taken care of Harriet ever since she was a baby. I named her. I was taking her to be married in Ireland.”

“Cornwall is rather out of the way for a trip to Ireland,” Clarissa observed. Nothing this man was saying added up. Despite his wild and abrupt manner, he intrigued her. Or, perhaps, because of it.

There was no use in denying the fact: she was bored. Although her cousin was a generous host, Nathaniel was busy with managing his estate, leaving Clarissa mostly to her own devices. Now, Mr. Monty had blown in like a summer storm and rained down more secrets in the span of five minutes than she had encountered all spring, and she was suddenly determined to uncover them all.

“Time is of the essence,” she said briskly. “Tell me what the Waterguard’s Riders are doing.”

“One of them rode to Polperro with a message. Two others commandeered a fishing boat to give chase. What happened after that, I don’t know.”

“Then there is nothing more you can do,” Nathaniel said easily. He tipped open the top half of a globe to reveal a bottle of liquor hidden inside. He poured two fingers and held it out to Monty. Clarissa’s conscience twinged when he accepted it with a shaking hand. He really was upset about his missing niece.

“There might be something,” she said slowly. Nathaniel froze with his drink halfway

to his lips. He shook his head ever so slightly. She ignored his unspoken warning. “There is a couple who live a few miles from here, in a cottage that used to be part of the Prescott estate. I have heard rumors that the husband, Mr. Thomas Davies, was involved in smuggling before he set up shop in Cavalier Cove.”

“You shouldn’t pay attention to idle gossip.” Her cousin frowned. “Where did you hear this?”

“From Mrs. Gosling,” she said. “Your housekeeper.”

A muscle in Nathaniel’s jaw ticked.

“If there is any hope of finding information, we must go at once.”

Clarissa glanced down at her dress. “I need a moment to make myself presentable.”

“There is no time!” Monty roared. She crossed her arms over her chest.

“I don’t think it would be wise for me to go anywhere with a drunken bully, sir.”

He gaped at her. Clarissa smiled sunnily. Her cousin’s low chuckle prompted their visitor’s scowl to deepen.

“I am not soused,” he declared sullenly.

“I shall only be a moment, Thaniel,” she said, ignoring him and addressing her cousin by a nickname from childhood.

“Whenever a woman says ‘a moment’ she means an hour,” Mr. Monty grumbled.

“Not Clarissa,” her cousin said. “She doesn’t have a vain bone in her body.”

She did not take this as entirely a compliment.

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Lord Jude Walsingham, the seventh Duke of Montague, huffed as that insolent mouse scurried off to change her dress. The amber liquid in his glass sloshed like a miniature sea ravaged by a storm. His hand shook, as did the associated arm. He was a furious and frightened ball of nerves, and he hated it.

“Drink up, old friend. I wasn’t joking when I said Clarissa would be quick.”

Jude scoffed. “She cannot know who I am or why I came here.”

“The secrets of the Wayward Dukes are safe with me. Without the Duke and Duchess of Cranbrook’s intervention, I might not have succeeded in my suit to reclaim the Prescott viscounty.”

“Did your nefarious double get what he deserved?”

During the Wars, Thaniel—then a mere commoner—had been taken captive by Napoleon’s troops. A younger son, he’d been keen to join the army and had quickly risen through the ranks as a charismatic leader, but eventually his regiment was defeated and taken captive. During his imprisonment, a stranger bearing a strong resemblance to him had claimed the Prescott viscounty after his older brother’s untimely demise in a carriage accident.

Nathaniel was Eleanor St. Giles, the Duchess of Cranbrook’s, great-grandnephew. She had rallied the Dukes to help free him from a foreign prison and evict the impostor—but not before he had nearly bankrupted the Prescott estate.

Jude had been too consumed with finding his own footing as a duke and covering up

his younger sister's out-of-wedlock pregnancy to be involved in the war, or the fallout from these events. The Montague name was to be cherished and protected at all costs. But he owed Nathaniel the news he had been sent to deliver, and Harriet's wedding had proved to be a convenient cover to visit his friend in Cornwall—until she was kidnapped while he'd stopped to ask directions at a tavern in town.

He still couldn't fathom it. Imagining the horrors his dear little Harriet might be enduring right now made his blood boil.

"He did," the viscount said with satisfaction. "Transported to Australia. We will never see hide nor hair of him again." He sobered abruptly. "Which is precisely the fate your niece's kidnapper deserves. Clarissa can help."

True to her word, the lady was back in record time. She had exchanged her sack-like pink dress that did nothing to flatter her appearance for a cream linen sprigged one. Pale green stripes marched down the skirt, elongating her curves and drawing attention to her elegant throat. The matching emerald spencer brought out the green flecks in her otherwise brown eyes. She was prettier than he'd thought at first glance.

"Charming," he grunted. "Where are we going?"

She tucked her hands into her elbows—an unmistakable defensive posture—and started toward the door. "We are going to visit the owner of a cottage that used to be part of the Prescott estate. I have heard mention that the new occupant, Mr. Thomas Davies, was involved in smuggling."

"Don't you need a chaperone?"

"No one cares what Clarissa does with herself. She is a spinster and firmly on the shelf," the viscount said bluntly. "Besides, you're hardly leaving the property. No one will notice."

A shadow flitted over the lady's features. She smoothed her expression into one of placid pleasantries when she realized he was looking at her. Jude followed her outside. "That was a rude thing to say," he mused.

"It's true," she shrugged. "I will be twenty-nine next month. I have been sent here to molder in the countryside lest my failure to land a husband blemish my younger sisters' efforts this Season. I assure you I have no matrimonial designs upon you or anyone else, but if you need protection from an unwed lady, I can request a maid to chaperone us, Mr. Monty."

She didn't know he was a duke. He intended to keep it that way.

Dusk gathered on the horizon. As they strode briskly to the rear of the house and down the hillside, angry clouds hung low over the bay. Lightning flashed within the roiling gray mass. He found a measure of solace that nature matched his mood.

"The only thing I am liable to need protection from is the rain." He sneezed. She set a brisk pace. The countryside here made his eyes water and his nose itch. He missed Acton Heath, his estate in the north. But he had a duty to fulfill and he could not return home until he had delivered Harriet to her intended husband.

"Tell me more about your niece's marriage," Miss Penfirth said, breaking his thoughts like a stray sunbeam through storm clouds. "Was she excited about it? Nervous?"

"Of course she was excited. She was on the shelf, too. Any woman would be relieved to find a husband after five fruitless Seasons."

"Any woman?" his companion asked sharply. She kicked a pebble into the grass.

"Yes, any woman." He ignored Miss Penfirth's sharp sidelong glance. Tetchy. No

wonder she hadn't found a husband. "Particularly since she is fortunate enough to be betrothed to an earl."

Guilt gnawed at him. Lord Lucarran was more than twice Harriet's age and generally of a cantankerous disposition, but beggars could not be choosers. By any external measure, Jude had done well by his niece.

If Harriet had gone quieter than usual before their departure, and remained that way throughout their journey, wasn't that merely a sign of a nervous bride? She would adapt. He knew she wanted children. She adored babies. But how much of this information should he share with the inquisitive Miss Penfirth?

"Not every woman wishes to marry into the aristocracy," she said. "I, for example, would vastly prefer a mere mister. All those formal dinners and the public expectations." She gave a delicate shudder. "Personally, I commend myself for avoiding matrimonial entanglements."

Her self-congratulatory attitude rankled him. "I'll allow there might be a rare exception. Whether you approve or not, I went to great lengths to secure Harriet's engagement."

"But did you consult your niece as to her opinion of the groom?"

Jude's temple throbbed. Storms sometimes provoked headaches, but this was an inconvenient time for one to start. "What are you implying, Miss Penfirth?"

"I wonder, Mr. Monty?—"

"It's Montague," he snapped. He ought to have used his other name, Walsingham, but in the panic after Harriet's abduction, he'd forgotten. He could only hope that she failed to recognize his distinctive title and take greater care not to give this observant

woman any additional clues to his true identity. Harriet's future depended upon his ability to keep this catastrophe a secret.

Thunder rolled overhead. Rain pelted the bay in the distance.

"Mr. Montague, is it possible that your niece ran off intentionally?" Miss Penfirth asked, picking up her pace.

"No, it is not," Mr. Montague bit out as they strode quickly down the path.

CHAPTER TWO

Clarissa wished she had waited to have the coach brought round. The afternoon had been sunny, but the weather could turn quickly here in Cavalier Cove. She eyed the storm brewing over the ocean with growing trepidation.

“This way,” she said briskly, pointing to the barely-discernible plume of smoke rising from a tidy cottage in the distance. “If we hurry and keep our visit short, we should be able to make it home before the storm.”

She hoped, anyway.

Ahead, a sturdy fence marked a vegetable garden. White geese waddled slowly near the edge of a small pond. Mr. Montague kept pace easily, his long legs eating up the ground. Not one to be outdone by a man, particularly one as surly as this one, Clarissa quickened her step. By the time they reached the flagstone steps, she was all but jogging and rather embarrassingly out of breath.

The door opened to reveal a pretty young woman with dark curls wearing an apron. She peered anxiously at them and said, “Yes?”

“My niece has been kidnapped,” said Mr. Montague. “I understand your husband may have information about smugglers.”

Clarissa winced. This wasn't the tone she would have taken. The young woman's brow furrowed.

“Thomas, you have visitors,” she called over her shoulder.

“Mrs. Davies, you might remember me from your husband’s store. We met last week,” Clarissa tried again.

“Miss Penfirth.” A noise like a kitten’s meow, but louder, snagged her attention briefly. “The viscount’s relative.”

“Cousin,” she confirmed. “I am sorry to disturb you at an awkward time, but as Mr. Montague has explained, it is an urgent matter. May we come in?”

“We don’t know anything about smuggling.” Again came that tiny cry. “We’re finishing our supper.”

“Who is it, Ada?”

“Viscount’s niece,” she muttered. Twin gray smudges beneath her eyes indicated tiredness. Clarissa chose to forgive the mistake. A man came to the door. He was tall and lean with a French air about him, and he spoke with a slight accent.

“Cousin,” she corrected. “You are Mr. Davies?”

“What’s this about?”

“They’re looking for a missing woman.” Mrs. Davies cast her husband a worried glance. “We don’t know anything, now, do we?”

“Not at all. But the weather seems about to turn. Come in for a few minutes.”

“We won’t keep you,” said Mr. Montague reassuringly as they were ushered into a cozy main room decorated with paintings of geese. The remnants of their dinner sat

on the polished wood table, and a baby's crib stood near the stove. The woman called Ada went over to it and scooped a tiny bundle into her arms.

A baby. That was what had made the mewling noise. Clarissa's gut twisted. She hadn't meant to intrude on the family's evening.

The husband, Thomas Davies, ushered them to a sitting area with upholstered chairs. Mr. Montague dropped into one, making it squeak.

"I would offer you tea, but as you can see, my wife is occupied."

"We didn't come here for refreshments," Montague declared acerbically. "I need information. Miss Penfirth says you know every smuggler in Cavalier Cove. We are searching for a man who goes by the ridiculous moniker Le Fant?me."

Clarissa fought the urge to smack her forehead.

A sly smile curled up Thomas' lips, there and gone. "Just because I was raised in France during the War does not mean I am disloyal to England. I know nothing of smuggling." He shrugged. "I cannot help you."

A muscle in Montague's jaw ticked. Clarissa had to do something.

"We aren't here to make trouble. We only want to find the missing lady. She is on her way to marry..." She glanced at the man beside her.

"In Ireland," he bit out.

"That's right, in Ireland." She hesitated, tapping her lips, thinking. "Why are you coming through Cornwall, exactly? It would have been faster to go through Liverpool."

“How do you know?” huffed Mr. Montague.

“Nathaniel said you were coming from the north. Near Newcastle Upon Tyne?”

“That is quite a distance,” observed Mr. Davies. “Would have taken weeks to go that far out of your way.”

“I had business with your cousin, Miss Penfirth, which is unrelated to Harriet’s disappearance and therefore irrelevant to this discussion.”

The glare he leveled at her was stormier than the sky outside. Message received: Don’t ask questions about why he was here. Which only piqued her curiosity further.

“All I am saying, Mr. Montague, is that if the lady was not altogether happy about her impending nuptials, it wouldn’t have been difficult to arrange for her to be ‘kidnapped’ from Cavalier Cove.”

“A fascinating theory, Miss Penfirth.” Mr. Davies tented his fingers. She had the distinct impression that he was enjoying their little spat.

“I cannot imagine it would have been difficult to tempt a smuggler into playing kidnapper. Every man has a price, and I doubt a scoundrel’s price is too high for a lady with adequate pin money to bribe.”

“Harriet didn’t run away. She is a good girl. Very obedient.”

Clarissa knew how that went. She, too, had been a very good girl. Like a dog. Yet her obedience failed to attract a suitor, and in the end, she decided she didn’t need one anyway. She was content with her quiet life—at least, she had been until Mr. Montague blew in with all his secrets. Now, she couldn’t resist the temptation to poke and prod him.

“We cannot help you,” insisted Ada, who had finished changing the baby and had returned with her cradled on her hip.

“May I hold her?”

Mr. Montague held out both hands. To Clarissa’s astonishment, Ada reluctantly relinquished her daughter. To her even greater surprise, Montague cradled the child expertly. A twinge somewhere near her heart at the sight of the tiny baby nestled against his broad shoulder shook her to her core.

Was she lying to herself?

“If you want to find out about smuggling, you’ll need to ask at the Cock and Bull Tavern in town.” Mrs. Davies plopped inelegantly into the chair beside her husband’s. “There is a ship called the Spectre that runs between Cornwall and France carrying illicit goods. My uncle, Mr. Patrick Leacham, is in the Waterguard. He has been searching for the captain of this ship, Le Fant^{me}, for years.”

From his sly smile, Clarissa had the distinct impression that Mr. Davies knew far more about the Spectre than he let on, but she was too distracted by Monty and the baby to glean further insight. There were too many questions bouncing around inside her skull, yet all her brain could say was: baby.

“You are comfortable with infants,” Ada said when no one responded to her statement about her uncle’s role in the Waterguard.

“I will never forget the moment I first held my newborn niece. I can still recall the faintly sour smell of her tiny, fuzzy head. Her pudgy legs and her shuddery infant sighs.”

Clarissa’s mind, already scrambling for purchase on anything remotely intellectual,

crumbled in the presence of a man who liked babies. She had to help him find his niece.

Outside, a clap of thunder brought her back to the present.

“That storm is moving fast. You ought to be going if you want to make it home without getting drenched.” Mr. Davies rose to his feet and loomed over his tiny daughter. “I need Lilou back now.”

Ada concealed a smile behind her fist. Clarissa gathered up the pieces of her shattered mind and said, “Thank you for seeing us. We shall visit the Cock and Bull as soon as feasible.”

“There is no point,” Montague grumbled as he placed the tiny baby in her father’s arms. For some reason, seeing her in Mr. Davies’ arms didn’t provoke the same strange mix of feelings that had taken her off guard with Mr. Montague. “The Cock and Bull is where this all started. The pirate absconded with her down a hidden passageway.”

“I have heard of caves carved into the rocks leading out to the sea,” said Mr. Davies. “It seems you have come here for nothing. Sorry we cannot help.”

Within moments, they were rushed out into the gloomy evening. Minutes down the path, the sky broke open. Rain pelted them as they ran.

“In here,” Montague said, pointing to an old lean-to. “We can wait out the worst of the storm.”

She picked her way through the mud and pressed her back against the rough wall, watching the rain come down in sheets. Shivering, she licked her lips and tasted raindrops.

“Since it appears that we will be stranded here for a while, tell me more about Miss Harriet.”

CHAPTER THREE

Don't look at her.

Jude kept his gaze fastened resolutely on the horizon, but it was no use. Miss Penfirth's soggy clothing only emphasized her soft curves. Worse, her nipples had pebbled into hard beads that could not be restrained by however many layers of cotton and silk. The subtle bumps were there, and he could not stop picturing the hue of those hidden, puckered buds, or how those lush globes would fill his hands...

"Harriet?" Miss Penfirth prompted, bringing him rudely back to the present. "Have you always liked babies?"

Jude cleared his throat. "Yes, possibly. Harriet is the only one I have ever had much contact with.

"I was seventeen and home from school for the summer when she was born. Everyone acted like Pamela, my sister and Harriet's mother, was too innocent to know better than to be seduced by a stable hand. To my parents, it was all the conniving lad's fault. She was so tiny and fragile, too young to have offended a soul, yet everyone acted as though her existence was her own fault," he said darkly. "Pam acted like she had nothing to do with it. Once the boy was gone, she carried on as if she'd never borne a child out of wedlock."

"What happened to the father?"

"He was dismissed from service as soon as Pamela's pregnancy was known. We took

great pains to conceal her condition. I learned he'd died some years later. I doubt he ever knew he had sired a daughter with a—" He caught himself before the word duchess could fall from his lips. "A lady," he amended.

That fall, he'd gone off to university, but he still thought of Harriet every day. By the time he arrived home at Christmas, she was so different yet still so sweet. With his father in decline, his studies had been cut short a few months later. By then, Harriet had been sent to live with distant relatives. Pamela was on the marriage mart, flirting her way into the hearts of every man who would pay her the slightest attention. The duty of finding her a suitable husband therefore fell to him.

Had Harriet's existence become common knowledge, the Montague name would have been besmirched. His other siblings might have struggled to attract suitable partners. Secrecy was paramount.

Thus, everyone had suffered the consequences of her actions except Pamela. She married a marquess and bore him four boys. If she ever thought about her daughter, it was with rancor. She rarely visited, and each time left Harriet's heart crushed.

Jude never forgot the charming little girl his sister had abandoned. As soon as was feasible, he'd brought her back to live at Acton Heath as his ward. Miss Penfirth's absurd notion that Harriet might have concocted a scheme to run away cut to the quick.

Why, then, did he have a sinking feeling that she might be onto something?

He didn't believe it. Harriet was a sensible girl. He had given her a choice and she had made the responsible decision.

Feelings didn't rate in a discussion of marriage. Feelings were foolish impulses that led one to do things like have premarital relations with a boy who groomed horses for

a living, and then abandoning one's child out of shame. The last time he had allowed himself to experience an emotion had been the day he held newborn Harriet...and a quarter hour ago with the Davies' infant daughter in his arms.

He was getting soft in his old age. Nearly forty and yet unmarried. His reaction to a stranger's child must be a sign that it was time for him to settle down. He had an inheritance to secure, after all. Raising Harriet had given him the illusion of fatherhood, but it was past time he found his own suitable match.

Miss Penfirth was not in the running. No matter what kind of feelings she stirred in him. Lust was not an emotion.

"Once this rain lets up, I think we should go into town." Miss Penfirth interrupted his thoughts.

"Tonight? Why?"

"To inquire at the Cock and Bull."

"There is no need. I was there. I can tell you everything you need to know," he said.

"You are a stranger in Cavalier Cove." She stared out across the soggy field. A gust of wind fluttered her skirts and plastered them to her legs. They were very shapely, her legs. The sprigged linen had turned nearly transparent, the wet fabric clinging to her thighs. Which reminded him that ladies wore nothing beneath the layers of their skirts. Hike them up by the fistful and one could?—

Enough.

She appeared unbothered by his scrutiny. Perhaps she was unaware. That made one of them. He was entirely too aware of his physical interest in her.

Jude shifted uncomfortably. The cold and damp did nothing to diminish the thickening of his cock. He tugged his greatcoat firmly into place, not that there was any chance of her noticing his increasingly dire condition through so many layers.

The cool, wet weather ought to have a dampening effect, he thought sourly.

There he stood, silently willing his willy to cooperate.

Miss Penfirth stared resolutely ahead, uncaring of her drooping bonnet, those bright intelligent eyes trained on the field. If he turned slightly to the right, and she angled her body just so, their lips would meet...

“It’s letting up,” she interrupted his runaway thoughts. The effect should have been a bucket of cold water dousing his arousal. Instead, her melodious voice sent his cock to painfully optimistic new lengths.

He blew out a breath and watched the steam dissipate.

“Well, then, shall we?” Miss Penfirth started out into the field.

“It’s still raining.”

“You’re very observant, Mr. Montague. However, we cannot stand here all evening. There are limits to how much time even I, a spinster, can spend alone with a strange gentleman.”

Was it his imagination or was there a note of brittle bitterness in her tone? She had been cheerfully efficient all afternoon.

Reluctantly, he abandoned his shelter and followed her.

* * *

If Clarissa had to endure one more agonizing second of Mr. Montague's sullen intensity, she was going to lose her temper. She was accustomed to dealing with men who delighted in making her uncomfortable. Men who belittled her by pretending to ogle the spinster and then laughed to their friends—they were easy to handle. One smart rejoinder usually set them on their back foot, and turning their tired, stupid jokes on them finished it. Like a boxer's punch and jab. They always left her alone after that.

But Mr. Montague's attention had been different. More potent. He made no snide remark for her to counter, and this flustered her. He loomed beside her, taller than most of the men she had seen, and broad-shouldered. If not for his expression, which looked like he'd been forced to eat a lemon, she might have said he was watching her with genuine interest.

But that was only her self-delusion getting in the way of common sense.

"You must be very tired after your ordeal," she said brightly when he caught up to her.

"I cannot rest until Harriet is found."

"It seems quite clear she will not be found tonight."

The glare he leveled at her made her quicken her stride. Mud sucked at her boots with each step.

"I don't mean to be insensitive. I am a pragmatist. If you are dead set against returning to the Cock and Bull Inn, then there is nothing more to be done tonight but eat our supper and go to bed."

Warmth rose to her cheeks at the word “bed.” She was not ignorant of the facts of life. There had been a time in her youth when she was keen to experience lovemaking. Now, that memory returned in a rush. Though she knew better, her innards turned fluttery and hot.

What was happening to her?

How could she make it stop?

CHAPTER FOUR

Clarissa had not yet finished dressing to come down to breakfast the next morning when a commotion from the yard brought her to the window. In truth, she was having considerable difficulty selecting from one of her five dresses. There was the comfortable but unflattering pink one she usually wore to breakfast. The green-sprigged cream would have been the next logical choice, but upon arriving back at the Prescott mansion her maid took the soggy linen frock away for cleaning. So that was out.

She pulled on her nicest silk-cotton blue gown, then immediately took it off. Nathaniel would suspect if she chose her best dress.

Suspect what? Her pride prickled stubbornly.

That you are making a fool of yourself over Mr. Montague, a little voice whispered. Admit it, if only to yourself. He intrigues you.

But you will never intrigue him, the rational part of her insisted. It's never reciprocal. You are invariably attracted to men who have their pick of ladies. They never choose you.

Clarissa pushed away memories of the last time she had been so foolish as to entertain romantic feelings toward a man, and chose the gray wool. It was a bit heavy and not especially flattering, but it would have to suffice.

Clothed, she was finally free to go to the window and find out who was yelling. She

had to crane her neck to see from this angle, but those were almost certainly the Riders of the Waterguard.

The Preventive Waterguard, formed several years before to patrol the Chanel and stop illicit trade, consisted of teams of land-based Riders coordinating with a fleet of boats watching the shore. The Excise Officers were only doing their jobs, but no one liked paying taxes and popular sentiment in Cornwall mostly leaned toward the smugglers. Everyone here had a hand in the trade, supposedly. Including, Clarissa suspected, her dear cousin.

This Leacham seemed like a rough fellow. Clearly, he and Mr. Monty didn't care for one another. A smile touched her lips at his curt tone. It faded immediately when she realized she should go down there and defuse the situation before Montague ran the Riders off. This might be her only chance to question them.

She rushed downstairs and out into the courtyard where two haggard-looking men in rough woolen coats with insignia stitched to the sleeves stood with their arms crossed and their feet wide. An aggressive posture. Neither had shaved in days. Nor, as she approached, bathed. She wrinkled her nose and tried to give them the benefit of the doubt. They had been searching tirelessly for a missing woman, in foul weather. Expecting them to appear clean and presentable was unreasonable of her.

Yet Clarissa couldn't help but notice the stark contrast with Montague's dark coat, somber slate waistcoat devoid of ornamentation beyond a subtle pattern in the brocade, and his pristine white cravat. Nor could she ignore the fact that the Riders were representing the Crown, and rather poorly, at that.

One of them eyed the white geese clustered on the lawn darkly. She could almost believe the bird was eyeing him with suspicion, too.

“What news of Miss Harriet?” she asked briskly. The gray-templed Rider glared at

her.

“Are you acquainted with the missing lady?”

“I am not.”

“Then I have no time to indulge idle gossip.” He returned his attention to Mr. Montague, whose normally thunderous expression darkened further.

Despite this, her heart skipped when his gaze cut to her and mirth glinted in those gray depths. The color of his waistcoat enhanced the steely shade.

Do all men have such long lashes?

“Miss Penfirth has agreed to aid me in my search for Harriet. She is Viscount Prescott’s cousin and an astute observer. I insist you share the information you have related to me with her.”

A vain part of Clarissa preened to be called an “astute observer,” until she realized the only thing she had been observing just now was the man’s attractiveness. She collected herself with a little cough.

The Riders didn’t look happy about having to explain themselves to a woman.

“The girl tossed a stack of pewter tankards off a shelf. Just went...” He swept his arm to demonstrate. “That’s why I say she must have known him. No lady would have helped a smuggler escape. Especially a French one.”

“Are French smugglers unusual?” she said at the same time that Montague spoke.

“She did not do it on purpose—ladies first, Miss Penfirth.”

“To Mr. Montague’s point, you seem certain that Miss Turner knew her assailant. What other evidence do you have to support this claim?” she said. Warmth fluttered in her middle. Don’t be such a goose. He’s only showing you common courtesy.

Which was more than she could say for the other two men.

To her left, Montague’s brows rose. To her right, the Riders both scowled. Clarissa understood that certain men could not abide being questioned by a woman. Her estimation of Montague rose when he gestured, indicating that the Riders should respond.

He couldn’t be one of Nathaniel’s peers. Although he was clearly wealthy, aristocratic men, even the mere Honorables—second, third, fourth, fifth sons and so on—usually had a particular sense of entitlement that irked her.

Mr. Montague irked her for many reasons, but not that one. He was admirably willing to concede a point, which in her view ruled out a title, although clearly he was well-connected enough to have arranged for his niece to marry an earl.

An Irish earl, however, would be scorned by most upper-class Englishmen.

She would grill him about his background later. His wealth could be a material reason for Harriet’s kidnapping.

“The lady didn’t protest much when she was snatched,” said the second Rider. Montague cast him a sharp glare in rebuke. “What? It’s true. He picked her up and ran into that passageway like she was a bag of goosedown feathers.” The man cast a gimlet glance at the geese milling about nearby.

“Harriet’s screams will haunt me to my dying day,” Montague declared warningly.

“There is an echo in those caverns,” said Leacham.

“I should like to see these caves,” Clarissa insisted.

“Nay, miss, we have already searched them thoroughly and boarded up the one entrance at the back of the Cock and Bull Tavern.”

In Cavalier Cove, it was a good guess that everyone was in on the local smuggling trade—a victimless crime, really. A visit to Maggie, Caden and Derwa Bulloy’s daughter, ought to yield interesting gossip.

“I know you and your companion spent a long and uncomfortable evening searching for Miss Harriet. Why don’t we all go into town together? You can take rooms at the inn and get a hot meal while I visit with Maggie.”

A little coddling of the masculine ego never went amiss. Bribing tired, hungry men with the prospect of a soft bed and good food ought to soften their rough tempers.

Leacham scoffed. His companion spat. Her brows shot up at their rude manners.

“Old Bulloy wouldn’t let us a room even if we had the scratch.”

“Ah. Perhaps at the other inn in Cavalier Cove? The Mermaid’s Rest?” She knew the excise officers weren’t well-liked in this town. She shouldn’t be surprised.

The Riders exchanged an incredulous glance. “Wouldn’t expect a woman to know how money works.”

She had inadvertently embarrassed them. Mr. Montague came to her rescue.

“I shall secure your lodgings on the condition that you inform Miss Penfirth of all

that you have told me,” Montague said in a tone that brooked no argument. He turned on his heel and strode away, his coat tails flapping. “I’ll fetch the buggy.”

“Miss Turner was taken out to sea. We gave chase but the Waterguard’s boats are no match for the Spectre,” Leacham said grudgingly. “We lost our quarry in the storm cloud. We’ve been riding the shoreline all morning looking for her.”

“I see.” She could understand why these men believed that Harriet had pre-planned her own kidnapping. Indeed, she was half inclined to arrive at the same conclusion. But she still wanted to inspect the scene of the crime herself. “Here is Mr. Montague with the horses. Shall we?”

* * *

The day was still early enough that the Cock and Bull’s dining room held a handful of visitors. Sure enough, Maggie scowled when the four of them made their entrance. Ignoring her furrowed brow, Mr. Montague strode to the counter and slapped coins on the scuffed wood.

“Two rooms for the night. Starting now.”

“For you and the lady?” Maggie jerked her head.

“No, I am staying with my cousin, Viscount Prescott.” Clarissa smiled warmly despite gritting her teeth over the barmaid’s cheeky implication that she was there with Mr. Montague. “We are working with these gentlemen,” —she gestured at the haggard Riders— “to track down the missing Miss Turner, who was stolen from this very taproom yesterday evening.”

Which Maggie knew perfectly well. She was a fine actress, though, for her eyes flared wide and she pressed her hand to her heart in feigned shock. “I have never

been so frightened as when that strange man leaped out of the shadows, knocked over the tankards I'd been drying, and nabbed that poor girl."

She was lying, if not well, then at least entertainingly. Clarissa almost forgave her for implying that she was there with a strange man. Maggie wasn't yet twenty and clearly had a flair for the dramatic.

"Are you certain you didn't recognize him?" asked Montague suspiciously. "I swear I saw you pointing over there and whispering to my niece."

"How would you have noticed?" the girl said tartly. "You were too busy arguing with that lot." She jerked her head at Leacham and his companion, then pushed the pile of coins back at him. "We don't want the likes of them staying here. You can take your money and stick it?—"

"Nobody was their best self yesterday." Clarissa scooped up the coins, placing them in a row. Click. Click. They glinted against the wood. "Please. Everyone is worried. The Riders can get settled while Mr. Montague shows me the tunnels."

Forced to see how much money she'd be turning down, Maggie relented. "I'll have to check with Papa."

"We want meals, too," the second Rider, who didn't seem to be the sharpest tool in the shed, called out. Leacham elbowed him.

A few minutes later, a grumbling Cadan Bulloy had granted begrudging permission for the disliked Riders to stay for one night, meals and care for their weary horses included.

"Bloody highway robbery," Montague grumbled as they picked their way through a crowded alcove used as a storeroom. It was little wonder that a man had been able to

hide himself in the gloomy depths.

“Regretting your generosity?”

“Immensely.”

Clearly, Montague had money, but he wasn't above having to think about his spending. Her pulse ticked up a notch. She still couldn't quite figure him out. While it was uncouth and impolite to ask about one's wealth, there were a hundred tiny indications that usually allowed her to accurately peg a man's social status quickly. His clothes, his mannerisms, his interactions with his inferiors, and who he deferred to socially, all pointed to a man's position in highly regimented English society.

She hadn't developed this skill out of avarice, but out of necessity. The Prescott family had been nearly bankrupt when Nathaniel inherited the viscountcy, and financially, they were still relying on him to bring them out of debt. She wished he would marry an heiress and get it over with, but she supposed that was easier said than done. No matter how young, titled, and handsome Thaniel was, hard-pressed men with expensive country estates to maintain outnumbered rich young ladies.

She had not been monied. While she had caught the eye of a coveted younger son, he had thrown her over in favor of a richer, younger, less challenging lady. Clarissa refused to think about him ever again. Starting now.

At the back of the alcove were boards nailed across a jagged hole in the wall. Mr. Montague unlocked the chain holding the makeshift door to a bolt embedded in the stone and picked up the lantern Derwa had given them.

“Ladies first,” he said.

What gallantry, Clarissa mused apprehensively as she picked up her skirt and

descended the rough stairs into the depths.

CHAPTER FIVE

A part from the slight knitting of her brows, Miss Penfirth displayed no hesitation descending into the rather terrifying rough-cut stairs. The steps had been hacked and chipped into the stone, steep and uneven, prompting him to wonder how ladies managed in long dresses. He supposed they were accustomed to managing such impediments.

A lesser woman would have shrieked the first time a stiff ocean breeze blasted up the naturally formed cavern, moaning like a sea monster. His hackles rose. Miss Penfirth stopped.

“This must be where the smugglers stash their smuggled goods.” Unperturbed by strange noises, she peered into a naturally-formed niche too low to stand up in. There was nothing inside except for an empty wooden box, but when he thrust the lantern forward, the dust revealed footprints and a blank spot where a large object had recently been stowed. A trunk of lace, perhaps. Or a tub of uncut brandy.

“You are admirably composed,” he said when the eerie moaning sound came again.

“I do not believe in ghosts or old wives’ tales,” she said crisply.

“Not even will-o’-the-wisps?”

Her nose wrinkled adorably, and she sneezed. “Especially not will-o’-the-wisps.”

“What do you think they are, if not spirits that lead travelers astray?”

“Gasses rising from the marshes,” she answered.

“How mundane.”

They continued downward. It was mostly a straight shot. If one knew the passageway well, he could understand how a grown man could navigate the steps while carrying an unwilling woman. He refused to believe that Harriet had run off deliberately. The first time he'd been down here, immediately after her kidnapping, he had been too anxious to notice details like a dark alcove.

A sick feeling sank to the pit of his stomach and lay there. Was she all right?

“What are you grumbling about?” asked Miss Penfirth.

“I was thinking that if the smuggler has harmed Harriet in any way, I will personally hunt him down and kill him with my bare hands.”

“You truly do care about your niece, don't you?”

A lump formed in his throat. “Yes.” A thought occurred to him. “I suppose I ought to let Lucarran know that his bride has been stolen.”

“Wait a day or two. If we recover her unharmed, their wedding can proceed as planned. Once they are married, this Irish earl will have every incentive to protect her reputation.”

“Do you know of Lord Lucarran?”

“A little. He isn't well-liked. He's also quite old, as I recall. Nearing sixty?”

“I myself turn forty in a few weeks,” he said indignantly. To Jude, the difference in

ages hadn't seemed egregious. He hadn't thought to ask Harriet.

"And I am not yet thirty. I would still hesitate to marry a lord twice my age. If I were barely into my twenties, I cannot claim I would do so with any enthusiasm."

He did not want to argue with Miss Penfirth.

"I made my decision. Harriet agreed it was her best option."

"What other choice did you give her?"

"I told her she could live at home"—he remembered not to mention his estate, lest he tip off the intelligent Miss Penfirth that he was no mere mister—"forever. She preferred marriage to the man I selected as the most suitable match for her."

Guilt gnawed at his bones. Harriet might not bear the honor of a title due to the unfortunate circumstances of her birth, but he had raised her to be a lady and he wanted to rectify his sister's error by ensuring that his niece received the distinction through marriage that she had been denied by birthright.

"Did she have any say in the matter? Apart from yes or no? Did he court her, is what I'm asking."

"She had five Seasons to find a suitor on her own." The breeze was cold and crisp now, indicating that they were near the exit. Why wasn't the passageway getting lighter? They ought to be able to see the opening to the hidden cave by now.

"I can personally attest that a lady without either an ample dowry or striking looks will struggle to attract a suitor."

"Her dowry was fine." The grinding noise in his ears was from his own teeth. "You

should have had no difficulty, dowry or no.”

She barked a laugh. “Me?”

“Yes, you,” he said gruffly. “You’re beautiful.”

“I assure you I am nothing of the sort, though I appreciate the compliment.”

His ears burned. Jude hadn’t meant to blurt that out, however sincerely he meant it. Worse, he’d made Miss Penfirth feel awkward. Her cheeks might be pink from physical exertion, but judging from the way she wouldn’t meet his eye, there was a measure of embarrassment in the mix.

“Well,” he said. “This wasn’t here last time. I suppose this might be why the upper door was such a makeshift contraption.”

He shoved on a wooden panel. Beyond it was a natural cave leading out into the sea. Water sloshed around his boots. Miss Penfirth joined him on the narrow walkway. The door slammed shut behind them.

“A rising tide,” she said when a particularly strong wave graced the toe of her boot. She edged back. “Look at the mark on the wall there. By high tide, there will only be a few feet of walkway. We should go back before we’re trapped here. I have seen everything I need to see.”

Wordlessly, Jude pushed the door. It didn’t move.

“Stuck,” he said in disbelief.

“Let me try.”

He stood back, as far as was possible, and for once in his life managed not to say anything while she attempted to pull, push, and otherwise yell for help.

“Save your breath. They won’t hear you.”

Miss Penfirth slumped with her back against the door, staring at the sloshing water in defeat.

“What will we do now?”

“Wait,” he said grimly. “Unless you know how to swim?”

* * *

Time passed. Without any way to gauge it, for he had left his pocket watch back at Prescott’s, each second felt like an hour. Minutes ticked by in eons. The incessant waves crept higher, sloshing over the makeshift walkway and forcing them back against the stone wall. The sun’s rays through the far opening barely shifted. Jude grew tired of staring at them.

“Someone must notice us missing soon.”

“I admire your optimism, Miss Penfirth.”

“Nathaniel will wonder where I’ve gone off to.” She cast a pebble into the sea.

“Eventually.”

“Probably not until nightfall.”

“I hope it’s sooner than that. I never did get breakfast.”

Jude winced at the loud gurgle of her stomach. “I should have waited for you to be ready.”

“I am a grown woman and chose to join you. Besides, I have been told I should try a reducing diet.”

“By whom?” he said indignantly.

“Nearly everyone, at one time or another. My mother, sisters, friends...” She trailed off. A pensive expression clouded her delicate features. “Everyone.”

“Any person who would ask you to change yourself is not worth your time,” he said gruffly.

She flashed him a quick, sunny smile that nevertheless failed to break through the clouds in her eyes. “A conclusion I also arrived at, although the lesson came at a considerable cost.”

“We’re not going anywhere, it seems. Tell me what price you paid, Miss Penfirth.” He leaned against the wall, arms crossed over his chest. “If it’s not too intrusive of me to ask.”

She chucked another pebble at the waves, casting a little too hard and sending the stone careening off the far wall instead. He’d touched a nerve. Despite her reticence, it felt nice to think about something other than Harriet’s predicament. He couldn’t remember spending time with a woman for no purpose other than idle conversation and companionship, other than his own female relatives.

For years he’d been so focused on raising Harriet to be a proper lady that he’d neglected his own life.

“It’s not a very interesting story.” She gave up throwing rocks and leaned back against the cold stone next to him.

“We’ve nothing else to do until someone decides to rescue us.”

Still, she hesitated, until Jude thought he might explode from curiosity.

“I am the eldest daughter in a family of nine children. My father died not long after my fifth sibling was born. Mother was forced to remarry, which resulted in three more children. Her sister, my aunt, is Nathaniel’s mother. When the Prescott title passed to him, my mother saw an opportunity to launch the family into a better social circle.

“Alas, her grand plans for me were thwarted by the fact that the Prescott name was penniless. A new viscount with little in the way of a fortune was considered an upstart. His poor cousin was no prize. After my first failed Season, upon which she had spent a considerable sum that we couldn’t really afford, I was put on a reducing diet and sent back to try again. If I were a stone lighter and kept my mouth shut, surely I could attract a wealthy gentleman.” She scoffed.

“Not one man in London took an interest in you? I find that difficult to believe.”

“One did. For a time,” she said wistfully.

“What happened to him?”

“To the best of my knowledge, he is hale, hearty, and happily married.” Her sigh of resignation was swallowed by the churning sea. “He courted me for three Seasons before throwing me over for an heiress. I truly believed we had a connection, but in the end his love of money outweighed any affection for me.”

“His loss.”

Her quiet scoff was swallowed by the lapping waves.

“Love makes fools of us all,” he said.

“Except for you,” she teased impishly.

“Yes, except for...How did you know?”

“That you’ve never been in love?”

“Is it that obvious?”

“An educated guess, Mr. Montague. I have known you for only a day, and yet I feel we have an understanding of sorts, which has loosened my tongue unforgivably.” She shuddered. “I must apologize. I am boring you with wretched family secrets and being completely ill-mannered in discussing money, of all things. I understand how such topics invite discomfort. I assure you that I have experienced the burden of a too-light purse for most of my life. It is only recently that Nathaniel has managed to restore the Prescott family’s fortunes and provide me with an escape from my mother’s constant criticism. Even so, if you are here to beg his aid, I can assure you there isn’t much to spare.”

It was on the tip of his tongue to say that money was not an issue for him, that in fact he had more of it than he knew what to do with, but then Jude realized that she thought he was in financial straits and that was his purpose in visiting her cousin. Which was not an illusion he could afford to dispel at present. His true identity must remain a secret for Harriet’s sake.

He stared at the sun streaming brightly through the cave passageway in stunned

disbelief. He didn't like for people to know he was a duke, but at some point, Miss Penfirth would discover the truth. She was far too clever not to, even if she had temporarily arrived at the wrong conclusion about him.

"I'm babbling," she said sheepishly. "I admit I have not spent this much time alone with a man, ever. What about you?"

"What about me?" he asked defensively.

"Are you yet unmarried? I assumed so, since the only ring I see is that signet of yours."

Jude clasped his hand around his left pinkie finger to conceal the only jewelry he wore: a small signet ring passed down to him from his father on his deathbed.

If you ever get into trouble, use this to request assistance from the other Wayward Dukes, he'd said. Without their help, I never could have kept Pamela's secret from the world. If you are ever caught up in a bad business venture, a scandal you need to keep quiet, or need help escaping a marriage trap, for example, call upon your fellow Dukes for assistance. They are an unpredictable but loyal lot.

He could hardly tell Miss Penfirth about the secretive Wayward Dukes, however.

"Not every man wears a wedding ring," he said stiffly. Most men of his class didn't, but he couldn't exactly tell her that. "You are correct. I remain a bachelor. I truly intended to turn my attention to my own matrimony once my niece was settled." He tossed a pebble into the water. "Then this happened and everything went to hell."

"What kind of lady would you pursue?" she asked teasingly.

You. The word popped into his mind instantly.

“Wait. Allow me to try and guess.” She tapped her lower lip in mock thoughtfulness. “You’d choose a girl fresh from the schoolroom. A rich one, to keep you in fine waistcoats and good boots. She would timidly await your instruction in the marital bed, and never complain when you would ignore her as long as she has sufficient pin money to keep her in ribbons and frivolities.”

What hung in the air, loudly unspoken but understood: the exact opposite of me.

“You wound me,” he declared. “I could never be content with only fine waistcoats and good boots. I shall require a sizable fortune indeed to make such a stultifying match worth my while.”

He turned to her. There was so little space on the walkway that the waves sloshed their boots. The hem of her dress and his pant legs had gotten wet and he could feel her slight tremble. She was cold, he realized as he edged closer, trapping her between the stone and the water.

He had compromised her, and he didn’t even care. Miss Penfirth was the only woman he would countenance for his wife, now. Once this business with Harriet was over, he would marry her. She simply didn’t know it yet. Tension flared when he brought his hand to her face and stroked the curve of her cheek.

“I vastly prefer the company of a woman with a quick wit and keen observation, who doesn’t take me too seriously.”

“Have you met such a lady?” she asked breathlessly.

“I have.” Her skin was so soft and rosy beneath his touch. “We are only recently acquainted, but I find I prefer her company to that of any woman I have ever met.”

He brought his mouth to hers and brushed a kiss across her soft, sweet lips. She

moaned and parted in welcome. Satisfaction coiled through him as he curled his free arm around her waist and tugged her lush body closer against his.

She was delicious. Ripe and crisp like an apple fresh from the tree; soft and strong like magnolia petals. The floral scent that had teased him relentlessly clung to her hair and skin, mixed with a womanly earthiness that awoke a carnal possessiveness within him.

Now that he'd had a taste, he would never be content until he devoured her whole. She tipped her head, opening to him with a sigh. Jude's mind blanked. His arms tightened greedily around her waist.

Caden Bulloy chose that moment to rescue them, damn his soul to perdition.

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CHAPTER SIX

Clarissa flung herself away from Mr. Montague with equal measures of alacrity and alarm.

“Mr. Bulloy,” she squeaked.

“Interrupting, am I?” The canny innkeeper winked. Her cheeks burned.

“No,” Mr. Montague all but snarled. “We weren’t doing anything worthy of interruption.”

Bulloy’s brow arched skeptically. Clarissa gasped. She didn’t understand how it was possible to burn with shame and fill with cold dread at the same time, but the combination effectively rid her of the dregs of pleasure.

“We were conversing. Quietly. The waves can be rather loud.”

How could he lie so calmly?

She was such a fool. She didn’t even know Mr. Montague’s first name and here she was kissing him—yet he wouldn’t even admit to the fact. That was fine, though, she didn’t need the headache of honesty.

An unwelcome thought clawed its way into her mind. He claimed he wasn’t married but men lied about that sort of thing all the time.

Despite his easy denial, Mr. Montague looked as disheveled and put out as she felt.

Clarissa had the entire climb back up the steep stairs to dwell upon what had just happened and the possible consequences. By the time they reached the inn's taproom, calm clarity had settled over her.

Mr. Montague had kissed her. They had spent hours trapped alone together in a sea cave, where they were discovered by the local innkeeper. His wife and daughter, though both kind-hearted, were also the town gossips. By any rational assessment, her reputation was damaged beyond repair.

I have finally allowed my curiosity to lead me into a trap I may not be able to escape , she thought ruefully . She was not going to marry a near-stranger, no matter how well he kissed. Mr. Montague was full of secrets and she would not marry a man who would not entrust her with his heart. A temporary punishment was nothing compared to a life sentence.

Montague ushered her to a table laden with two bowls of stew and fresh bread with butter. Her mouth watered. Within seconds, all she could think of was food.

“I am starving,” he said. “I don't know how you have managed all this time.”

She swept her skirt aside and sat, resisting the urge to tuck into her unexpected meal. Montague showed no such restraint. He ripped into the bread and slathered it with butter before dipping it into the stew. After a few bites, he halted abruptly and stared at her.

“Don't tell me you're still on a reducing diet.”

Blood rushed to her cheeks. Of all the things to say publicly. She laughed uneasily, for she was used to offhand, cutting remarks about her figure, and picked up her

spoon.

“I gave all that up when I resigned myself to spinsterhood. However, we ought to devise an explanation for our inadvertent indiscretion just now.”

Her heart pounded and she could hardly take a bite of stew.

“There is no help for it. I shall marry you, if you want.”

Her heart plummeted. Clarissa didn't know what she had been expecting, but a begrudging proposal was not it.

“I never said anything about wanting to marry you,” she said quietly, to keep from anyone overhearing. He stiffened.

“I see. All that pathetic backstory you shared with me wasn't an attempt to gain my sympathy.”

“Why would I want sympathy from such a churlish companion? Never mind setting myself up for decades of discord.” She set down her cutlery with a precise click. “I find I have soured on your company, Mr. Montague. Good day, sir.”

She strode outside, scattering the geese in her haste.

* * *

Clarissa made her way back to the Prescott estate in the buggy, feeling not one qualm about leaving Mr. Montague to walk back alone.

To think, only a few hours ago, she had enjoyed being nestled on the bench seat with him. Their drive had felt a bit like courting.

That must be why she had lost her head and confided her pathetic life story to him, then kissed him back like a parched flower reaching for rain.

She was a sensible woman. Logical. Rational. Everyone said so. Until he came along.

What prompted her to lose her head over a surly grump of a man who clearly resented the prospect of marrying her?

In the courtyard, Clarissa flung her bonnet and gloves into her maid's hand and stormed into the house.

“What has you in such a lather?” Her cousin had just come down the stairs and still had one hand on the balustrade. His brows arched in surprise.

“You should know that I have been publicly compromised. Mr. Montague has begrudgingly said he would marry me. I have told him off in no uncertain terms. I refuse to be shackled to that miserable?—”

“Should we have this conversation in private?” he asked, taking her elbow and gesturing in the direction of his study.

“What does it matter?” she huffed. “All of Cavalier Cove will know I spent hours alone with him trapped in a sea cave. If Caden Bulloy hadn't come down to check on us, we could have drowned when the full tide came in.”

She didn't mention the kissing.

Clarissa wasn't precisely certain how much danger there had actually been. For once, she didn't particularly care, either. Precision was less useful than venting her spleen. She would have preferred to die in that sea cave than be humiliated by Montague's begrudging offer of marriage.

For the span of a morning, he had acted as if he genuinely liked her company. But just like her onetime beau, that only applied when no one was watching.

Tears burned her eyes. She swallowed. Nathaniel strode to the globe, tipped back the lid, and extracted a cut glass bottle of brandy. He poured half a finger and splashed water into it, then held it out to her.

“If you don’t want to marry him, you don’t have to. If a child results from your indiscretion, Montague can afford to set you up with a tidy property somewhere?—”

Clarissa took a long, burning sip of her drink and choked. Her vision blurred, but the brandy’s fire scorched her tears away. She laughed and coughed in equal measure, pounding her chest. When she could finally speak again, she croaked, “Too far, Thaniel. No clothing was removed.”

“Clothing doesn’t need to come off, Cousin.”

“I don’t need to know the details,” she snapped, though she did know from personal experience. “It was one kiss, and we were caught. Marriage seems like an excessive punishment for what was a minor error of judgment.” Her humor dissipated as quickly as it had come on. “I might have actually considered the notion if he had asked me with an ounce of enthusiasm instead of acting like he were being led to the gallows.”

“Have you ever known a man to be enthusiastic about the prospect of getting leg-shackled?”

“Yes. Most of them are more eager than the brides,” she said flatly. Her cousin’s lips twitched.

“Touché. I suppose that’s true. We complain and fuss about finding a wife but we’re

rarely hesitant to claim our prize once we have found a lady who suits.”

A servant brought in a tray of biscuits and scones. Clarissa abandoned her brandy in favor of tea and helped herself to a currant scone.

“Despite his poor delivery, you might wish to entertain Mr. Montague’s offer for other reasons,” said Nathaniel.

“Such as?”

“They are not my secrets to divulge.”

“Mysterious. How am I to consider them when I don’t know what they are?” She tapped her lips with her forefinger.

“A fair point, and that is all I will say about the matter. This is between you and him.” He craned his neck to peer past her. “If you want to avoid the gentleman in question, you might wish to make yourself scarce. He’s coming up the drive now, on foot, and he doesn’t appear to be overly pleased.”

Clarissa stuffed the remaining pastry into her mouth and scooped up another one to take with her. She had had enough of Mr. Montague’s company for one day.

* * *

Jude strode into Prescott’s study where the footman had informed him that he would find the viscount.

“Calamity upon calamity befalls us,” he said by way of greeting. “I regret to bring you bad news for the second day in a row.”

“Clarissa says you have compromised her,” Prescott said without preamble.

Shame seared down his spine. He was unworthy of the Montague name. A duke courted ladies of great fortune and even greater beauty before selecting a wife who would be a credit to his coffers and uphold the family name. He did not accidentally get trapped in a smuggler’s sea cave with a woman of low birth and blurt out a proposal that she promptly rejected. It simply was not done.

“I have. We must therefore marry, and quickly.” His pulse quickened at the thought. There was more than one way to win a reluctant wife. Clarissa wasn’t immune to social pressure, and he wasn’t afraid to resort to such tactics if that was what it took to get her into his bed.

“That might not be possible. My cousin is notoriously hard-headed about these things. Perhaps tomorrow you will have better luck convincing her to be your bride. May I suggest asking instead of ordering her to the altar?”

Jude’s grinding teeth echoed hollowly within his skull. His had been a shite proposal by anyone’s standards. Especially his own. He wasn’t prepared, and he hated having to improvise on the fly.

“I don’t have time for this distraction. I am here for a fresh horse. I will accompany the Riders up the coast in search of the Spectre . Inform Clarissa that we must be wed at once upon my return.”

“That isn’t possible, even if she were amenable, which she is not. She is not a resident of this parish and neither are you.”

“She cannot refuse me,” he seethed. Harriet always hated it when he got his dander up, but Jude couldn’t help it. He was not the sort of scoundrel who ruined a lady’s reputation and then left her hanging. He had no respect for such men. There was no

other option. “You must make Clarissa see reason.”

“Does she know you are a duke?” Nathaniel asked idly.

“No.”

“You might want to be more forthcoming with the truth if you want her to say yes. I am certain she would make an excellent duchess, but she should know before going into a union what she’s signing up for.”

“I don’t want her to marry me for the damned title!” he roared. “The reason I like her so much on such a short acquaintance is that she enjoys my company without having the slightest idea that I am a duke. I have courted with ladies and never once had the impression that they liked spending time with me for any other reason than the size of my fortune and my connections to the other Wayward Dukes.”

By now his hair must be thoroughly disheveled, he had spiked his fingers through it so often it must be standing on end like a porcupine’s quills. That was what he felt like: prickly and aggrieved, ready to stab anyone who came near. A good, hard ride might not accomplish much of anything but it would release some of the pent-up anxiety and anger boiling inside him, a witch’s cauldron of bad feelings and outrage.

How dare Clarissa refuse him? She, a commoner, and he a duke?

Which reminded him of the reason he had come here in the first place. This was a terrible time to give Prescott the news, but he might as well get it over with before he was beset by yet another calamity.

“Speaking of the Wayward Dukes, Cranbrook has asked me to convey this message to you personally.” He extracted a rather battered envelope from his inner pocket. The red wax seal remained intact, showing an entwined WW with the letter C, similar

to his own signet ring, only his bore an M. Each signet ring was distinct and passed down to each new “duke” from the previous successor, and they were often used as a code when seeking assistance via written correspondence—as Cranbrook had requested of him do in return for the favor of keeping Pamela’s secret.

“What does this concern?”

“You have been appointed the guardian of an orphaned ward. A little girl named Estelle.”

“Why me?”

“He did not divulge his reasons to me. I presume he explains his rationale for naming you her guardian in that letter. I will not speculate why, though I can tell you he chose me to personally deliver the letter because he had been trusted with the secret of my niece’s birth.”

There had to be a sordid story behind little Estelle’s origins, otherwise there was no reason to involve the Wayward Dukes. Jude knew it was none of his business, and he was up to his neck in secrets already. He couldn’t summon a shred of curiosity about anyone else’s personal drama.

“I must be going. My horse is waiting, and Harriet won’t be found by me sitting cozily by the fire.”

“Wait.”

Jude stood stiffly, waiting for Prescott’s reproach. He was under-slept and confused and aching for his niece’s safety, but none of this excused the fact that he was being an ass, and he knew it. The habits of secrecy and self-protection were too ingrained.

“I’ll have a word with Clarissa, if you want me to try and change her mind.”

He bobbed his chin once, without hesitation. Relief cut through the knot of emotion binding his chest. He inhaled fully for the first time in what felt like days.

“Please do. I will have no other woman for my bride.”

One advantage of being a duke was that he nearly always got what he wanted.

But Jude had not counted upon Clarissa Penfirth’s stubborn force of will.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Rain rolled over the Cornish countryside again that afternoon, this time without the grand theatrics of a thunderstorm. By afternoon, Jude was wet, miserable, and far from shelter.

“Keep up, Monty,” called out Leacham. Jude gritted his teeth and dug his heels into his tired mount’s flanks. He despised that nickname. The Riders were rough company, the Cornish terrain as harsh and unforgiving as its inhabitants, and his thoughts continually bounced between Harriet’s whereabouts and Clarissa Penfirth’s outright rejection of him. It still smarted.

Water dripped down his collar.

“Where is this place?” He sounded like a child whining, Are we almost there? Composing himself, he straightened his spine and patted his horse’s neck. “This one needs to rest.”

He said nothing about the harsh way his companions drove their own horses.

“Down that hill.” Leacham pointed down the slope. They had split off from the other two Riders to cover more ground. Without a reliable communication system, he wasn’t sure what the men expected to accomplish, but he supposed the more eyes they had searching for Harriet, the better. All that mattered now was that they find her.

It was too much to hope that she would return home untouched. Tonight, when he

returned to Prescott's, he would have to write to Lord Lucarran to inform him of the disaster that had befallen his bride. Putting it off any longer risked rumors getting back to London before he could do damage control.

Jude sighed. Why couldn't anything ever be easy?

"That's the place," Leacham said with a sinister satisfaction that Jude didn't like one bit, pointing down the hill at a tidy cottage with bright flowers spilling from the window boxes. The only pop of color in the landscape. Everything else here was gray. Gray rocks stained dark with wet gray rain, the gray rolling ocean waves. Even the grass had acquired an ashen hue to his eye.

But there was this cheerful little cottage with a fishing dinghy moored out front and a garden with a chicken coop. For the first time since his kiss with Clarissa this morning, he felt hope.

Leacham pounded on the door rather rudely, in Jude's estimation. The Rider's company had begun to grate many miles and several hours ago. He was grateful not to have to work this way. Part of him admired Leacham's toughness and determination, despite knowing it was motivated by vengeance toward the smuggler who had bedeviled him for years. He cared little for Harriet's safe return apart from hoping that her safe return would finally mean the smuggler's capture.

Fine. Jude could work with a man bent on revenge. But the sooner he could stop, the easier he would feel about the situation. It was absolutely imperative that no one in Cornwall discover that he was the Duke of Montague until Harriet was safe and she was safely wed to Lord Lucarran. That included Clarissa Penfirth.

First he would find Harriet. Then he would handle Clarissa.

The thought of handling her lush curves sent an inconvenient rush to his loins. At that

exact moment, the door jerked open and a petite woman with amber skin and black braids peered out. Her wide smile fell when she saw them.

“Where is your husband?” demanded Leacham.

“Benoit!” she shouted. A dark-skinned man stepped out onto the small porch and shut the door with his wife inside. Given the Rider’s overt aggressiveness, Jude didn’t blame them for leaving them standing outside, though he had been looking forward to getting out of the weather for a few minutes.

“We can talk here.” Benoit crossed his arms over his chest.

“Where is the Spectre ?”

“An’ how should I know? My boat is there. She is the Haint .”

Benoit was a Yankee, Jude realized with a start. His French-American accent wasn’t one typically found in Cornwall, and it took him a moment to place it.

“Don’t deny it. Two days ago, your ship was seen tied to the back of the Spectre heading into heavy weather. Tell me where she is.”

“She offered aid when I needed it. On the sea, we are all friends.” He shrugged, but the tense set of the man’s shoulders belied his nonchalance.

“You expect me to believe a smuggling ship stopped to help you out of the goodness of her captain’s heart?”

Jude winced at the way Leacham spoke to this man on the front stoop of his own home. Little wonder the Riders were so disliked when they treated people with such disdain.

“Is there anything you can tell us?” he pleaded. Benoit’s gaze darted to him, then narrowed as he returned his attention to Leacham. “Did she sail east or west? Could you identify her captain if you saw him again?”

“Aye.”

“Let us into your house.” Leacham attempted to swagger past.

“No.” Benoit blocked him. “You leave us alone, Rider. We ain’t nothing to do with smuggling in this house. You have no authority here.”

Before the scene could turn into a scuffle, Jude grabbed the belligerent Rider by the back of his jacket and hauled him off the porch. “Stop.”

“He is in cahoots with Le Fant?me,” Leacham seethed, shaking him off. “I have come too far not to succeed at capturing him now.” He stormed back up the steps, forcing Benoit to back up. “A search of the premises would reveal hidden stores of lace and tubs of brandy, wouldn’t it?”

Benoit shook his head vehemently. “If I tell you which way they sailed, will you leave us alone?”

“Yes,” Jude said firmly, cutting off Leacham.

“They sailed toward Falmouth. The captain, he’s a Frenchman. Young. Handsome.” He glanced uneasily at Jude. “There was a young miss with them. Didn’t seem too happy to be there.”

Jude’s pulse quickened. She was alive, and relatively unharmed. Harriet didn’t have a quick temper, but once set off, she could be fiery. Being kidnapped would certainly do the trick.

“Them?”

Benoit hesitated. “There was another crewman on board. Old.”

“What were their names?”

“Didn’t get the crewman’s. The captain is called Rémy.”

“Not Thierry?” Leacham leaned in eagerly. Warily, the American shook his head.

“There must be an entire gang of them. Le Fantôme isn’t one man, he is a syndicate!”

His eyes glinted with excitement. This was the most animated Jude had ever seen the man.

“We’ll send every Waterguard boat off the coast of Cornwall scouring the sea between Polperro and Falmouth. Riders searching the shore. They must be holed up in a sea cave somewhere!”

He patted Jude’s chest with a damp hand and hastened to their tired, waiting horses.

“I am so very sorry to intrude upon your evening,” Jude said to Benoit.

“You know the girl, don’t you?”

“She is my niece.”

Perhaps it was foolish, but he trusted this man. There was relief in speaking the truth. Yet the family’s name depended upon him continuing to carry the weight of decades of lies—all told for a noble cause. Heavy all the same.

“He won’t hurt her. He’s a good man, Rémy. A bit rough around the edges.

Impulsive, but he has a good heart.” He tapped his chest with his fist.

“That’s reassuring. If you see her again, please tell her...” He trailed off. His heart ached. He couldn’t think of the right words. Any words. All he had was a well of feelings he didn’t know how to describe. Not that he should attempt to describe his state of mind to a complete stranger. “I just want her home safely. That’s all that matters.”

Benoit’s lips parted as if he might speak, but Leacham called out at that moment. “Onward, Monty, we have a smuggler to catch!”

He nodded and made his way through the mud to his horse.

* * *

Hours later, well past his usual supper time, Jude dragged himself into Prescott’s mansion and shed his wet clothes and boots with the help of a footman. It was uncouth to undress in the foyer but he couldn’t be bothered to care. Every muscle in his body ached. He hadn’t ridden that long or that hard in years.

“Mr. Monty!” exclaimed a female voice as he ascended the stairs to his bedroom.

“Miss Penfirth. Forgive me. I thought you would be in bed by now.” Although he was clad in nothing but his trousers and shirt, barefoot, cold, and hungry, his mind promptly forgot all about his sad state and leaped into a soft, warm bed with Clarissa, naked. Images of her lush breasts filling his hands and her moans echoing as he?—

Good God, get a grip on yourself, man.

“I shall let you tend to your...erm...yourself.”

Her cheeks were crimson as she passed by him. Jude stared at the ceiling and blew out a breath, willing his cock to stop responding to the heated visions of sex wheeling through his brain. Utterly futile.

In his room, he dropped into the hip bath the servants had brought up for him and scrubbed away the day's rigors with bay rum-scented soap. Imported from Provence, France. A luxury he had denied himself for years in the interest of patriotism. With the Napoleonic Wars finally over for good, he was free to indulge his taste for fine French products without guilt.

Once he was clean and had eaten the tray of supper brought to his room, he made his way downstairs. As tired as he was, he ought to fall into bed, but he wanted to find a map of Cornwall. How far was it between Polperro and Falmouth? He didn't know. But now that there was a clearly defined area in which to search, he was invigorated to get out there again.

His thighs protested. Jude braced one hand on his back. He would go by carriage, if the roads were clear enough. Not on horseback. He was too old to take that kind of punishment.

"We meet again."

He stopped short. "Miss Penfirth. What are you doing in the library?"

"Searching for evidence."

"Evidence of what?"

"I think my cousin is involved in the trade. You know. Smuggling." She raised her candle higher. "I have suspected it for some time."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Clarissa tried not to stare but it was no use. Mr. Montague was devastatingly handsome when fully dressed. In his banyan with damp hair, he was painfully attractive.

He doesn't want you, she reminded herself, trying to quell the flutters in her stomach.

"How did you arrive at this conclusion?"

She didn't really want to explain her reasoning. What if she was wrong? The prospect of losing face with this man, of all possible men, was too horrifying to contemplate. I wouldn't have told him if he hadn't surprised me. Again.

"The Prescott family fortunes, as you may not be aware, have been historically precarious. When Nathaniel took over from the previous viscount, his great-great-uncle, he inherited an estate drowning in debts. The traditional way to manage such unfortunate circumstances is to marry an heiress."

"Yet your cousin remains unmarried."

"Indeed. I explained earlier that he has restored the family's fortunes, but I haven't said how. I don't wish to get him into trouble, you understand. I trust that you won't be revealing any secrets to your new friends in the Waterguard."

"Upon closer acquaintance I find their company rather grating. Leacham's in particular."

Clarissa edged away, peering at the shelves. “Was there any progress today?”

“We have narrowed our search down to the stretch of road and sea between Polperro and Falmouth.”

“That isn’t very narrow.”

The hope flickering in his weary eyes dimmed. Guilt ate at her. She hadn’t intended to crush a man who had worked tirelessly to bring home his niece.

“Do you have a map of the area?”

“There is an atlas over...” Clarissa sauntered along the bookshelves, bending to find a large volume on a low shelf and flipping to the page. “Here. This is the area you’ll need to search.”

“At least we know where she was last spotted.”

“How long ago?”

He shrugged tiredly. “Our source wasn’t specific. Last night, I believe.”

“Then your smuggler could be anywhere. A ship can move quickly.”

“But not without being seen by the Waterguard. His Majesty’s boats might not be fast, but they are numerous. Leacham assured me he had enough men to cover the area and connect with boats patrolling the shore. He is determined to capture this smuggler.”

Clarissa studied the map, keenly aware of Montague’s presence. He loomed over her, yet maintained a respectful distance.

“It is possible.” She placed one index finger over the names of each town and slid them toward one another, forming a triangle with her thumbs pointing out to sea. “Might work.”

He raised one hand to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. Clarissa flinched and stared at him.

“I...apologize. For the way I spoke to you at the inn. I made it sound like marrying you would be an obligation, not a joy.”

“You don’t know that it would be a joy,” she said quickly. “I am far too accustomed to my independence for marriage. Too sharp-tongued. Downright shrewish, when I am not being pathetic.”

He winced. “I’m sorry I said that. It is unfathomable to me that anyone would want to change you. In any way.”

The flutters in Clarissa’s stomach came swooping back.

“If my proposal was churlish?—”

“It was.”

He chuckled. “I realize that. All my life I have regarded marriage as an unavoidable duty. Harriet’s kidnapping, and then compromising you, brought to the fore feelings about the institution that have nothing to do with you, Clarissa.” His throat worked. He had a very nice throat, muscular and defined. Seeing it without his cravat felt like seeing him naked. “If I may be so bold as to use your forename.”

“You may.” She could hardly breathe. Her tongue darted out to dampen her lips. His eyes darkened as they dropped to her mouth and then slowly dragged back up. She

felt that gaze like a touch. “What is your given name, Montague?”

“Jude.”

“I like it.”

“It’s unusual. I have never much liked my name.”

“Better than ordinary, in my view. What if I were to shout a name like ‘Charles’ or ‘James’ across the ballroom? Half the men’s conversations would be interrupted.”

He laughed, a low rumbling sound that made her insides hot and slippery.

Oh, no. This was a terrible development. She genuinely liked him. His reluctant proposal had burned, for she had believed her growing feelings weren’t reciprocated. But if they were, she would be forced to confront all the ways in which her boring, comfortable life could change. For better or for worse.

“Not that I would be so ill-mannered, but if there w a fire, for example, it would be much more effective to shout ‘Jude.’”

“Or you could yell, ‘fire.’”

She ducked her chin, giggling. “True.”

He cupped her cheek, stroking the curve. “I compromised you once.”

“Accidentally.”

“Clearly, I didn’t do a thorough enough job. Might I try again, Miss Penfirth?”

Her pulse scrambled, her thoughts scattered and her eyes fluttered closed. Through her lashes she watched his lips descend, her view shuttering the second before his mouth touched hers. Soft. Firm. Promising everything and nothing. She tasted his hope and his caution. He was full of secrets, but she was getting closer to the truths at his core.

She therefore allowed herself to hope, too.

There was no one to catch them this time. Her cousin had gone to bed hours ago. The servants were all asleep, and if any stirred, they would not dare to intrude upon this part of the house at near midnight.

She was safe to explore the breadth of his shoulders with unsteady hands.

Safe to devour his kiss with her own.

She had never felt more sheltered than she did in his arms, for she knew that however far this went tonight, he would keep her secret. Jude was very good at that.

The syllables of his given name were a treat she could savor silently whenever she wished, long after their paths had diverged. They barely knew one another.

Where does he hail from? Clarissa's mind piped up. What else don't you know about him?

Jude must have sensed reason trying to assert itself, for he tugged her hard against his chest and slid his hand down her backside with a groan.

"You are perfect," he murmured against her lips. "Every inch of you."

His hand came back up, searing a molten path along her spine. At the apex they

tangled in the hair at her nape. His other arm was tight around her waist. A needy throb pulsed low in her core.

It had been so long since she kissed anyone. Four years, or was it five now? At least that long, and the experience hardly rated anyway.

For all his flaws, Jude Montague was an expert kisser. He teased and took, finding the little spot beneath her ear that sent an electric current zinging through her body straight to her center.

“I would marry you tomorrow, Clarissa.”

“You’d be a fool,” she said. A wooden panel wedged into a crevice was a ridiculous reason to marry anyone. They were both old enough to know better than to care what village wag-tongues said. Neither of them lived in Cavalier Cove. By next month, their visit would be nothing but scandalous story embellished and distorted with each retelling until the details were unrecognizable.

“You’re right. I’d be your fool any day of the week, and thrice on Sundays.”

She chuckled at that. Daringly, he slipped his finger inside the collar of her wrapper and slid it down until his hand hovered over her breast. With a moan, she arched into his touch. He shoved the fabric aside and squeezed her through the thin cambic nightdress.

“Goodness,” he breathed. “I would give anything to see you bare.”

He pressed forward. She edged back a step, then another, until her bottom hit the bookshelf she’d been browsing. Jude made her feel, if not quite dainty, then delicate in comparison to his towering brawn. She moved one leg up the back of his muscular thigh and reveled in the feral sound he made, a low growl that could have been

menacing but was more like a lion's purr. Even though lions couldn't purr, that was what he sounded like to her ears. The sound vibrated through her, viciously tearing away her inhibitions.

Their mouths met and clashed in a tangle of tongue and lips and teeth. He nipped her earlobe and fought the belt on her robe open. Cool air breezed along her exposed skin. His lips trailed heated kisses over her collarbone, stopped only by the edge of her high-necked nightgown.

“Unwrap me, Jude.”

His eyes darkened. He slipped one finger beneath the collar of her wrapper and tugged slowly until it slithered down her arms to puddle at her feet. He dropped to one knee and squeezed her breast until the nipple stood on end, sucking it deep into his mouth through the cotton. Clarissa's mind blanked. She arched into the wood. Pure sensation flooded her system. Cool air, barely warmed by the banked coals in the fire grate, kissed her calves. The chill skimmed up her thighs to her molten center, which ached for his touch.

For now, her breasts had his complete attention. He squeezed and sucked as she writhed and clutched his hair. He tugged the fabric down and oh— his warm lips on her bare skin were even better.

Blindly she rubbed against his thigh like a cat in heat. A long, thick protuberance jutted into her stomach. Wild excitement leaped within her.

“Do you like touching me there?”

“Yes,” she whimpered.

“How far would you let me go tonight?”

He skimmed his broad hand down her thigh, inching her nightgown up until he found bare skin, making circles on her hip. Flesh on flesh. She was drunk on it.

“Anything,” she promised recklessly. “Whatever we do together tonight stays in this room. Our secret.”

A man who kept as many secrets as he did would surely keep one more.

He pinned her with a fierce gaze and found her center. She shuffled her legs into a wider stance, leaning heavily against the bookshelves with the edges biting stripes into her back and shoulders. She didn't care. She wanted this. She wanted him.

“I want more than one furtive night with you, Clarissa. I want your forever.”

Bertram, who had come so close to proposing to her before deciding upon another woman, had whispered similar sweet words into her ear. She had allowed herself to be foolish with him, believing his honeyed lies about a future together. But she was not reckless enough to promise her future to Jude, a man so secretive he could hardly bring himself to share his given name.

Promises whispered in the dark carried no more weight than shadows. They fled at the smallest intrusion of light. Morning would reveal the harsh truth that Montague desired her in private but was ashamed of her in public. He'd shown her that he was no different from Bertram at the tavern earlier today.

She would allow herself a taste of passion tonight. Nothing more.

“Please,” she moaned. He found her center and reverently traced the soft nest at the apex of her thighs. Snaking her hand down between their bodies, she found his engorged cock and groped her way past the hem of his banyan to the loose pajama pants he wore beneath it. He was remarkably long and hard, filling her palm. She

wanted to taste him. But before she could, he parted her folds and slipped his fingers inside her.

Clarissa made a desperate sound. He groaned into the crook of her neck.

“You’re so wet,” he growled. Strangely, this made her feel powerful—that she, a pathetic spinster, could bring this strong, handsome man to his knees with nothing more than her own wantonness. He thrust deeper inside her, pumping in short bursts, twisting his wrist to hit— that — spot ?—

Stars burst behind her eyes. She clutched whatever she could grab onto, his hair, his banyan, losing her grip on both as she rode the wave of pleasure.

“Good,” Jude crooned. “You come so prettily, Clarissa, with your cheeks flushed and dark eyes peeking through the fringe of your lashes. Lips parted and panting for me.” He withdrew his fingers from her core and sucked them. She gaped at him in shock. What a gloriously filthy thing to do.

His darkened eyes blazed with desire. “I could make you come over and over again for hours. Days. I would adore every part of you with every part of me.”

The prospect of giving her body to this man as his carnal plaything tempted her greatly.

With a pang of sorrow, she realized that the pitiful experience she’d wasted her virginity on had been a pale shadow of what was possible. Here was a man who could magnify her pleasure tenfold, given the opportunity. He could make her forget her own name, if she allowed it.

She shouldn’t.

Torn, she buried her face in his collar and gently squeezed his cock. She was tempted to drop to her knees and kiss him there, but she had once flown too close to the flame of lust and had her wings singed. She didn't dare take things further with him now.

There was no hope for a future with as many secrets as this man held. She demanded honesty above all else and he was incapable of it.

He smelled deliciously of bay rum soap and a hint of the sea, undergirded with a spicy scent all his own. She breathed in his scent, memorizing it for future use.

“I must go.”

“So soon?” He pinched her chin between his thumb and forefinger, bringing her gaze up to meet his. “No one has to know.”

“That is the problem,” she said, pulling away, grabbing her wrapper and thrusting her arms into the sleeves. She gathered her hair to pull it out of the collar and yanked the belt into a knot she would regret once upstairs. “I don't want to be your shameful secret, Jude. I deserve to be loved openly, without shame. If you cannot give me that much, then this is hopeless and we should stop.”

Seconds stretched into eons. The giddiness of pleasure gave way and cold reality crashed through her like a physical blow.

She had miscalculated again. He had proposed reluctantly at the Cock and Bull because while kissing the curvy spinster in private might be enjoyable enough, she wasn't the kind of woman any man willingly chose for a wife. The knowledge that she had let herself care again, despite knowing better, stung like a knife cut. Sharp and deep.

Turning on her heel, Clarissa fled.

CHAPTER NINE

Damn and blast. How had he gotten that so wrong?

One minute he'd been savoring Clarissa's piquant flavor, then next, she was reading him for filth and storming off. His cock twitched in agonized yearning.

"Down, boy," he said glumly. If she weren't his friend's female relation and this wasn't his friend's own house, he would chase after her. Try to set things right.

Why had she fled? He'd perhaps taken things too far, in retrospect. As clever as she was, Miss Penfirth was a sheltered, unmarried lady.

Although she hadn't seemed particularly innocent, now that he was replaying events in his mind. Clarissa displayed no coy shyness, only forthright enjoyment of their shared activities, and a hint of hesitation that he didn't notice until his head cleared sufficiently for reason to reassert itself.

Jude didn't mind if she wasn't entirely virginal. He was hardly untouched himself. The standard women were held to was hypocritical at best. But the prospect of Clarissa being experienced with bedsport invited all kinds of questions—mainly, was this the reason she had been so angry when he compromised her? Did that boulder she'd talked about while they were trapped in the sea cave take advantage of her before throwing her over?

Her cold reaction to his admittedly grouchy proposal made much more sense if that were the case.

He snorted. And she accused him of having secrets. At least he had good reasons. Keeping his title undisclosed was essential to protecting Harriet's reputation. Three months from now, she would be happily married on an estate in Ireland and the rumors of a kidnapped lady in Cavalier Cove would be nothing but local lore—if he kept his mouth shut and so did Prescott. No one else knew he was a duke. He'd made certain of that. He couldn't tell Clarissa, even if he wanted to.

Which he didn't. He was rather enjoying the novel experience of meeting a woman who liked him for himself, flaws and all.

Soon, this miserable journey would be over. He felt certain that a narrower search area would result in locating his niece. The smuggler's days were numbered. He would hang for his crime. Jude would tie the noose himself if he had to.

Once he had the situation in hand, he could confess everything to Clarissa. Until then, the only matter he'd be taking in hand was his own cock.

He flopped into his bed, blew out the candle, and extracted his still-erect cock from his silk pajamas. His own callused hand was a poor substitute for the soft round globe of Miss Penfirth's breasts or the way her generous bottom filled his hands. He'd been so close to hooking his arms beneath her knees, bracing her against the bookshelves, and sliding deep inside her.

He pumped up and down, remembering the texture of her skin, licking his lips for the faintest remnant of her tang. His body tightened, from his straining neck to his tense back and his calves as taut as wires, until hot liquid pooled on his belly in a rush of release.

Jude sank into the pillows with his free arm behind his head. He wanted all of her. Clarissa's breath, her pants and sighs and little ohs when he discovered a place on her body that connected deep inside her soul. He wanted to burrow there and make a

home.

You've gone daft. He stared into blackness. The moon's wan light filtered through the shuttered window, past the heavy curtain, barely enough for him to discern the shape of the bedpost near his foot.

He could tie her to that bedpost. Smack her bottom. Find out just how willing she was to take everything he had to give. She was an earthy, sensual woman underneath that bright veneer of reserve.

But first, he had to get Clarissa to trust him, and that was proving to be more difficult than he had ever thought possible. Imagine—a spinster refusing a duke.

Unfathomable.

She wouldn't turn him down a second time if she knew. Yet that begged a different question: would she still want him, Jude, when she knew he was the Duke of Montague?

He didn't know, but he discovered that the answer mattered to him very much indeed.

* * *

The next morning Jude was jerked out of a deep slumber by frantic pounding on his door. Every muscle screamed as he rolled out of bed and limped to answer it.

“Sir, a messenger just arrived with word from the Riders. Around dawn, they inquired at the Tideswept Inn and were informed that a couple had been staying there for days. The wife was supposedly ill, but when they tried to force their way upstairs, the couple ran off.”

“Harriet.” He snapped to attention.

“Based upon the description provided, they believe so, yes.”

Within minutes, he was dressed. Despite the agony of climbing onto a horse, he was not going to let Harriet’s kidnapper get away. This time, he would find her—and that wretched smuggler would face the hangman’s noose.

Guilt burrowed into his bones. He had to contact Lucarran. Soon. Ideally, once Harriet was safe. But what could he possibly say to make the earl go through with the wedding? How could he explain that it wasn’t Harriet’s fault?

He dug his heels into the horse’s flanks and decided he would worry about that later.

CHAPTER TEN

“G one?”

Clarissa had spent most of the night tossing and turning, thinking about all the things she wanted to say to Jude. Revising them, then discarding them altogether, only to decide a few minutes later that she absolutely must speak her mind, then change it again when courage failed her.

Thus, she awoke late and chose the coward’s option to take a breakfast tray in her room instead of going down for a communal meal. By the time she had summoned the fortitude to make an appearance, Mr. Montague had already left.

Her stomach sank. Now she was going to have to stew in this emotional cauldron until his return.

“A messenger arrived early with news of his niece. He left right away,” said Mrs. Gosling, Nathaniel’s housekeeper. In her white cap and apron, she bore an uncanny resemblance to the white geese that guarded Cavalier Cove.

“I pray they have found the poor girl,” she muttered, her mind spinning. “Mrs. Gosling, may I ask you something?” The older woman looked at her expectantly. “Is my cousin engaged in the trade? You know. Smuggling.”

The tiniest flare of surprise in the housekeeper’s eyes sent an electric current up her spine. But the woman demurred.

“I wouldn’t know anything about that,” she said. “Whatever talk you’ve heard about his visits to London is just that. Talk. Nothing more. The local gossips have little excitement to speculate about, I’m afraid.”

“I see. If one did wish to find out more about the smuggling trade in Cavalier Cove, where would I start?”

“The Cock and Bull would be a fine place to start asking, if one was so inclined. But don’t expect anyone to give a straight answer to an outsider.”

“Right back to where we began,” sighed Clarissa at the woman’s retreating back. At that moment, Mr. Montague burst in with a furious young woman she didn’t recognize.

“I told you he is innocent!” she shouted.

“How can you say that, Harriet? That rogue stole you! He kidnapped you in broad daylight. Tossed you over his shoulder and took you like a prize pig.”

“A charming description, Uncle Monty.” The girl’s hair was blond and disheveled, her dress askew and freckles dotted her reddened cheeks. Her hazel eyes snapped with fury.

“Are you saying you coordinated this?” Jude’s hair looked like he’d been pulling it by the roots for hours. It stood in a tangled halo around his head. Gray smudges lurked beneath his haunted eyes. Clarissa’s heart twinged with pity. Wrecked and haunted, he speared her with a furious glare before continuing to press his niece. “If you didn’t want to marry Lord Lucarran, you had weeks to speak up! When we left Acton Heath you were sure this was the right course. Now what am I supposed to tell him?”

She had never heard him sound so angry. The name Acton Heath sounded familiar but she couldn't quite place it, and it was hardly relevant right now.

"I didn't know there was another option open to me until I met Rémy," Harriet exclaimed. "Where is he?"

"Prescott and the Riders are taking him to the wine cellar. There's an unused cage they can use as a cell."

"Which way is it?" Harriet cast about.

"I can show you, Miss Turner, if your uncle agrees." An awkward silence descended over them.

"I do not," he said stiffly.

"I had gathered. Perhaps both of you ought to freshen up and have something to eat before you continue this conversation?" She pressed her palm to her chest and said, "I am Clarissa Penfirth. You must be Mr. Montague's niece."

"It's lor?—"

"Enough," Montague cut her off with a sharp look. Harriet glared. He tugged her close, firmly but not roughly, and whispered in her ear. She nodded once, her expression turning pensive.

"Yes, I am Harriet Turner," she mumbled.

Peculiar. Not only was Jude concealing something, his niece was apparently in on the secret. Were they engaged in the trade, too? That would explain so much.

“Miss Penfirth, if I may be so bold as to request your aid as a woman to ensure my niece is unharmed, I would be grateful for your assistance. I have a smuggler to interrogate and an urgent message to post,” said Jude. He strode away without waiting for her confirmation.

Goodness, he could be abrupt and arrogant.

Harriet ducked her chin as if whatever her uncle had said left her chastened. Puzzled, Clarissa took her arm and led her away.

“I don’t want to marry Lucarran,” she said despondently.

“Might I inquire why? Forgive my inquisitiveness. I have heard so much about you these past few days, I feel as though I already know you. I understand entirely that you don’t feel the same way about me.”

“I don’t love him. The things Rémy told me about the earl while I was his...captive...made me realize I cannot go through with the ceremony. I simply can’t.”

Her hands twisted continually as if stillness were not to be borne. Her despondency was belied by a flicker of anxious intensity. Clarissa’s heart went out to her. Harriet was like a trapped bird fluttering inside a locked cage.

“Might the smuggler have had a reason to tell you half-truths or outright lies?” she asked gently. “You are a pretty girl. He wouldn’t be the first scoundrel to try his hand at seducing a young lady by any means necessary.”

He had, after all, kidnapped Harriet. Scrupulous honesty wasn’t exactly this French smuggler’s foremost trait.

“No,” Harriet insisted, shaking her head. “He told me the truth when no one else would. I hardly knew Lucarran, but I had the impression of him that he was self-centered and harsh-tempered, with little regard for women. If not for Uncle Monty’s recommendation, I would never have said yes.”

“I find it difficult to believe that no other man offered for you.”

“The ton is competitive. They don’t call it the marriage mart for nothing. Men choose women based upon money, family connections, looks, and personality. In that order.”

Clarissa chuckled. “Well put. Sadly, I agree. I know the pain of being on the shelf intimately.”

“You?”

“Yes, me.”

“But Uncle Monty?—”

“He is charming in his way,” she interrupted firmly. “We have worked closely together these past several days. I have had a chance to get to know him a bit. In spite of his gruffness and propensity for keeping secrets, I enjoy your uncle’s company. I also know when I am being humored, not courted.”

A sick feeling sank like a stone in her stomach. Last night, he’d been willing to show her passion, but just as she had feared, in the bracing glare of daylight, he was embarrassed by her. She had been a fool to hope otherwise.

“Miss Penfirth, with all due respect, I believe you are being obtuse. On the ride back here, all my uncle could talk about was how quickly he and that odious Leacham character could get Rémy into the hangman’s noose, and you. How intelligent and

wise you are. What good character and cheerful spirit you displayed under trying circumstances. If we are exchanging confidences despite being near-strangers, I believe my uncle is more serious about you than he ever has been about a woman in his life.”

Clarissa couldn't believe her burning ears. “We can discuss your uncle's matrimonial plans once yours are sorted,” she said, leading her guest into an empty room that had been waiting for Harriet's arrival for days. “In the meantime, let's get you cleaned up.”

* * *

While Harriet bathed, Clarissa tried to make herself useful by visiting the captured smuggler in Nathaniel's wine cellar. She found her way blocked by one of the Riders, who gave her a lewd once-over that left her feeling like a film of dirt clung to her skin.

“The sooner those cretins are out of our hair, the better,” she muttered, giving up on her attempt to visit the prisoner. For now.

“Which cretins?”

“Nathaniel! You scared me.” Clarissa's heart pounded. “These Waterguardsmen. I don't like them.”

“I doubt anyone likes paying taxes, never mind the obscene rates set by the King to restore his coffers.”

“If the money went to improving the lives of ordinary English citizens, I suspect the people wouldn't be so quick to thumb their noses at the law. Including...you, cousin?”

He froze, then shook his head. “I should have known better than to think I could outwit you.”

“How long have you been smuggling?”

“I don’t, honestly. I’m more of a fence. Mrs. Gosling coordinates the goods smuggled into Cavalier Cove through the sea caves and stairs cut into the cliffs. Mr. Davies sells some stock in his Emporium. The rest I take to London every fortnight or three weeks and deliver them to yet another middleman, who forges the excise stamps and passes them off to a warehouse. Shopkeepers buy them in bulk, none the wiser.”

“How long has this been going on?”

He scratched the back of his head absently. “Ever since I came to Cornwall. I was desperate, Clarissa. I had no money, no prospects. Everything was falling apart. A household of servants I had only just met were depending on me to find a way to turn things around. Your family was looking to me for help. The ordinary solution of marrying an heiress was hardly practical. I was as new to the marriage mart as you were, and none of the wealthy highborn families would so much as glance at me, title or no.”

“They are an insular group,” Clarissa agreed. “But aren’t you worried about being caught?”

“It’s crossed my mind a few times. I want to get out of this, but if I do, I lose a connection with the villagers. They could turn me in to save themselves.”

“You might have considered that before going down this path.” She sighed. “What’s done is done. I will keep your secret, of course. Now that they have their smuggler, the Waterguard will hopefully take their win and leave us alone.”

“I don’t have much hope of that. Leacham will have won his promotion at last, but as long as there are tariffs, there will be smuggling in Cornwall. Which means there will be Riders patrolling the shore.”

“They wouldn’t stop and search a viscount’s coach,” she said with more certainty than she felt.

“I have been banking on that idea for years,” he said ruefully. “I am searching for a way to get out of this with my dignity intact. I need a little while longer.”

“I shall help you evade the law in any way I can,” she promised. “You’ve done so much for the Penfirths. We owe you, even if the rest of my family doesn’t know how much.”

He tugged her into an embrace. “You’ve always been my favorite cousin, Clarissa. You deserved better than what you got on the marriage mart. I hope you and Montague can come to an agreement.”

“Never mind that,” she said briskly, pulling away after giving Nathaniel a quick squeeze. “It’s nice to know I have your approval, but I cannot marry a man I barely know. Especially when he keeps so many secrets.”

“He still hasn’t told you?” her cousin asked.

“Told me what?”

“Nothing.” He shook his head tiredly and scrubbed his face as if the weight of the world sat upon his shoulders. “I’m sure he has his reasons, though I think he’s being a fool.”

“I had better go and check on Miss Turner,” she said, keen to avoid further

speculation. If Mr. Montague were a smuggler, then he might not be as wealthy as she had believed. Yet if he wasn't, how had he made a match for Harriet with an earl?

Nothing was adding up.

"How is she?" Nathaniel interrupted her thoughts.

"Unharmed and in love with her scallywag. She insists she won't marry Lucarran."

"That will be a blow to Montague." He patted her shoulder awkwardly. "Whose side will you take?"

"Hers, obviously. It's her life. Her wedding. Not his."

"You aren't worried that she wants to throw over an earl for a lowborn smuggler?"

"Frankly, it sounds like the earl was willing to marry Miss Turner out of pity and avarice for her dowry, despite her low birth. Why should the title matter more than love?"

"I never thought you were a romantic."

"I am, though. The only reason to marry is for true affection and respect. If one does not have those, all the money in the world won't make up for it." She ducked her chin to hide a wry smile and scuffed her slipper on the floor. "Or at least, that's what I tell myself to salvage my pride after the way I was thrown over by Bertram."

"I fear I have no choice in the matter. I never asked for a title. I was glad to have it at first. But now, ten years in and still struggling to get my feet under me financially..." He trailed off. "It's past time I accepted reality and started looking for an heiress. Any heiress will do. If you have any recommendations, please feel free to make an

introduction.”

“Alas, all my previous acquaintances have abandoned me to my lonely spinsterhood. Even if one had all the money in the world, I would not recommend her to my favorite cousin. You deserve a wife who lights up every time she looks at you, the way Harriet does when she’s talking about her French smuggler.”

“The way you perk up whenever you hear Montague’s name,” Nathaniel said softly.

“But he doesn’t react the same way when he hears mine.” Clarissa gave him a quick, sad smile and began walking away. This conversation was too heartfelt and too heavy. She couldn’t help but overhear her cousin’s parting question, however.

“Are you sure about that, or are you too afraid of getting hurt again to notice?”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Jude paced the library while Harriet stood straight and stubborn, hands clasped at her waist. He'd never seen that mulish expression on her face before.

After all the trouble he'd gone to in order to keep her ordeal under wraps, she wanted to marry her abductor.

Absurd.

A farce.

What had happened to his sweet little niece? The one he had been enchanted by as an infant? The girl he'd raised into a proper young lady? That Harriet Turner was gone. In her place was a changeling.

"I am not marrying Lord Lucarran," she insisted.

He dropped his head into his hands and groaned. "Yes, Harriet, you are."

"No, I am not, and if you would only listen to me, you would understand why."

"Fine. Do inform me why you are acting like a petulant child instead of a grown woman with a responsibility to honor her word," he snarled.

Behind Harriet, perched unobtrusively on a wingback chair with her chin propped on her fist, sat Clarissa, listening. She missed nothing. The fact that he had concealed his

status as a duke for this long was a miracle. He'd done it to save his beloved niece, and she was rewarding him with ingratitude.

"Rémy was helping me," she declared. Ridiculous nonsense from a lovestruck child. Harriet was twenty-three but she had always been a sensible girl, yet Jude saw no sign of sense in her now. "He saw me. You and I traveled together for weeks, yet not once did you notice how much I did not want to marry Lucarran. You barely look at me."

Jude flinched.

"I wish you had told me that before we trekked halfway across England to bring you to him."

"We could have married in London."

"Lucarran requested the ceremony take place in his home country. I obliged him. You were offered a chance to refuse him and instead you agreed. Why back out now?"

After all I have done to protect you, this is how you thank me? By acting like your feckless mother?

He dared to glance at Clarissa and found pity in her bright eyes.

He loathed her pity. He didn't want it. Didn't need it.

"Uncle Monty, you presented me with one choice, take it or leave it. You made it very clear that if I refused Lord Lucarran, I would remain at Acton Heath as your perpetual ward and nothing but a burden. I only said yes to his offer because you so obviously wanted me to and I was desperate to please you."

Clarissa's brow pleated. This would be the worst time for her to guess that he was a duke. The Montague family's estate was famous in the north. It wasn't implausible that a lady would have heard about its rolling green acres and ancient oaks, the productive fields tilled by tenant farmers, or the pottery factory he had built to take advantage of the fine clay found in the less arable land. There had been a stir when a duke went into trade, but he considered it more of a workshop supporting artisans. For profit, of course. Everyone benefited.

He didn't have time for Clarissa's anger now. He had to make his stubborn youthful niece see reason.

A growl rumbled in his throat. He hated the idea that he needed to remind her of her obligation to marry the earl. But obviously, he did. Lucarran was already on his way from London. He'd sent word that he was coming as soon as he received Jude's private messenger. He expected to reach Cavalier Cove before midnight. He trusted Lord Montague's word that Harriet remained unviolated and agreed that the best course of action was to marry her immediately, thus putting to rest any rumors that might circulate.

Except that Jude had the distinct sense his darling niece wasn't quite so innocent anymore. As if to confirm his worst suspicions, she said, "I am not your little niece in need of protection anymore. I can make my own decisions. I am pleading with you to help Rémy make amends for his crimes, which I do not believe to be as bad as they have been painted by the Waterguard."

"He is a criminal!" Jude exploded.

"Until the Waterguard proves its case in court, Rémy Desmarais is an innocent man." Clarissa's unyielding patience and the fact that she was correct only drove his ire higher. She murmured to Harriet, who glanced uneasily at him before determination hardened in her face.

Women.

She was a woman now. All grown up. His little niece didn't need him anymore. A vise tightened around his ribs. His lungs couldn't expand past the ache.

“Clearly, my darling little niece is still in need of protection, if this is the kind of decision she makes when left to her own devices.”

He strode from the room without a backward glance.

* * *

Poor Harriet's lower lip trembled. Her eyes glistened with tears.

Clarissa had to say something. If she had kept her mouth shut a few minutes ago, Mr. Montague would have stayed. They could have worked things out if she hadn't ruined the moment.

But oh , how angry Jude had made her just now.

“Miss Turner, I have had several days to become acquainted with your uncle. He despises being backed into a corner. Give him time, and he will come around.”

“Will he?” Harriet said despairingly.

“I believe so. In the meantime, I have a suggestion. Come. Let us speak with my cousin. He may have an idea.”

She and Harriet found Nathaniel out back inspecting the roof of an outbuilding.

“The whole damn thing needs to be replaced. For every farthing I bring in, ten more

go out. I shall have to see what else I can sell,” he muttered.

“Cousin, Miss Turner has come to plead her case.”

“I don’t see what I can do to help you.” He scowled at the roof, clearly distracted. Undeterred, Harriet launched right in, repeating everything she had told her uncle in hopes of finding a more sympathetic audience. Clarissa’s contribution to the discussion was to arch one brow whenever Nathaniel seemed inclined to skepticism. By the end of their conversation, Clarissa could see him wavering.

With a bit of cousinly pressure, she could convince him to give her the key to the Frenchman’s cell. All they had to do was wait until the Riders returned to the Cock and Bull for the evening. Judging from the way Nathaniel kept finding odd things to do around the estate, he was as anxious to be rid of their unwanted guests, too.

Once Harriet was settled and the house was quiet, she made her way to Mr. Montague’s private quarters. His rooms were spacious, if shabby, which was in keeping with the rest of the Prescott house. Her pulse scrambled as she knocked twice. He yanked the door open wearing nothing but his shirtsleeves and trousers, looking no less haggard and careworn than he had before.

Only more undressed. She swallowed. This was a bad idea, and yet...

“What do you want, Miss Penfirth?” he growled.

“I came to apologize. I shouldn’t have interfered in your discussion with your niece. May I come in? This is not a conversation for the servants to overhear.”

He gestured to the sitting area beside the fire. Heat rose to her cheeks when she saw the huge four-poster bed that dominated the room. She perched in the seat and determinedly ignored it despite the fervid possibilities her mind conjured. Jude’s big

hands on her breasts. His hot mouth sucking and licking trails of pleasure down her?—

“I feel as if I’ve lost a child,” he said brokenly. Each and every one of Clarissa’s inappropriate imaginings winked out in a puff of smoke. She shifted guiltily in her chair. He was despondent and she was supposed to be lending a sympathetic ear, not imagining him naked. He stood with one forearm braced against the mantel, brooding into the firelight. The dancing flames caressed his face lovingly like fingers of hellfire, tempting her to do the same.

“Harriet?” she queried in an attempt to force her mind away from other subjects. He nodded bleakly.

“She acts so differently now. She was always meek and docile.”

Clarissa had her own opinion as to Miss Turner’s docility, but now was not the time to share it with a man who was suffering.

“Is it not better to accept that she has made her decision than to compel her to fulfil a bargain she no longer wishes to uphold?”

He glanced at her, his dark eyes roiling with emotion. Her heart ached for him.

“You obviously love her very much,” she said softly. A lump clogged her throat. She couldn’t get the rest of what she wanted to say out.

I would give anything for you to love me that much.

But he wouldn’t. Their dalliance would be forgotten this time next week. He would return to wherever he was from, and in a few weeks she would return to her mother’s house to knit and keep company with women twice her age. She didn’t mind—they

were generally kindhearted ladies—but a part of her yearned for more from life. To experience love, and be loved in return. To have a family. Mr. Montague valued family, that much was clear. They had this in common.

“She is like a daughter to me,” he said.

“Then you should at least meet with her chosen groom. Harriet is an intelligent girl. She would not have chosen him without good reason.”

Jude paced a few steps, radiating anxiety. “What would I tell Lord Lucarran? He is on his way here now to finalize the marriage.”

“Try something along the lines of ‘Good sir, I understand this is a blow to your honor but surely you do not want a wife who yearns for another man.’”

“He wouldn’t care. Aristocratic marriages are not about feelings. They are about wealth. Consolidating it.”

“But she isn’t an aristocrat.” Clarissa tipped her head. “I thought you said she had an adequate dowry, but wasn’t highborn.”

“She isn’t,” he gritted out. He jerked his head away as if he wanted to say more but couldn’t.

She swallowed past a lump in her throat. He was still keeping secrets from her. Perhaps, if she could accept that this was destined to be a short-lived affair, she could let herself enjoy a dalliance?

Jude seemed to read her thoughts. With a fierce expression, he took two strides to her and cupped her chin. Startled, she blinked up at him.

“You are the one good thing to come of this entire misadventure, Clarissa. You are the one thing keeping me sane. I know I haven’t always acted like it, but your counsel has been gold.”

Slowly, she stood. His hand never left her face until they were standing toe-to-toe. Her heart hammered against her ribs.

“You are as wise as you are beautiful.”

“I cannot be very wise, then, for I am no great beauty.”

He huffed. “Your beauty is the kind that time cannot wither.” He tugged her closer. “Kindness and intelligence are in short supply. You are amply endowed with both.”

He bent to capture her lips, his breath ghosting against her cheek. Clarissa slid her hands up his chest to twine around his neck. She opened to him, welcoming, testing her welcome with a tentative darting of her tongue between his teeth. He groaned and anchored her hard against his front, palming her breast through her dress.

“You’re just as well-endowed here. An irresistible combination. I cannot comprehend how any man allowed you to slip through his grasp, but I am so grateful he did, for I have you now and I am not letting you go.”

Heady words indeed. Clarissa felt like she was soaring high above her body, yet grounded in his touch. She tugged his shirt hem out of his trousers and dared to dance her fingertips along the bare skin of his lower back. He groaned and pressed the advantage, his tongue tangling with hers. Molten heat settled low in her core.

The placket of her dress parted. How had he managed to slip free those little buttons without her noticing? No matter. Clarissa stepped away from his embrace, letting the fabric slide down her shoulders and past her waist to puddle at her feet.

Jude's eyes caught hers and held. Reaching behind his head, he tugged the loose linen of his shirt up and off, tossing it casually aside. Just like that, he was naked from the waist up. A huge lump jutted against the front of his trousers. Her mouth went dry. She dragged her gaze back up to find a smirk curling up the corner of his mouth.

“Like what you see?”

“I do,” she said boldly. “You sang my praises, but if I had my way, I would leave you in a perpetual state of undress.”

“To the horror of all who saw.”

“No one would see you but me, for I would keep you all to myself,” she said brazenly as she worked the laces of her stays. They fell away, leaving her in her shift and stockings. His gaze raked down her body. His eyes darkened.

“On the bed, minx,” he ordered.

CHAPTER TWELVE

O bediently, Clarissa scrambled onto his four-poster clad in her shift and stockings.

“Hold on.” He pointed to the bedpost. Clarissa clutched the wood and rose on her knees. Jude lifted her long leg and stripped her stockings down. Three long, lonely nights he’d spent in this very bed imagining this exact scenario, and now she was here in the flesh.

“Gorgeous,” he said, running his palm admiringly up her calf. Denying himself a peek beneath the hem of her shift. For now.

From his position on the floor, he was eye-level with her breasts. He fisted the hem and tugged it up to her waist. She cast it aside, leaving her gloriously naked. She was Venus incarnate with her lush breasts and full hips. Her dark hair fell to her waist. He wrapped his arms around her waist and sucked her glorious pink nipple deep into his mouth. Bliss. She arched into him, threading her fingers through his hair and moaning.

Louder. He was going to marry this woman. Damn the risk of getting caught. Nathaniel would be ecstatic to have his spinster cousin married to a duke. He probably ought to mention that detail to Clarissa at some point, but this was not the time.

When he had taken his fill, he graced her nipple with his teeth and released her. Dazed, Clarissa gazed at him, her brows knitted in confusion. He pointed to the pillow.

“Lay down,” he growled. A sly smile touched her lips. Instead, she got on all fours. Jude interpreted this as an invitation to smack her bottom. She yelped, laughing.

“What was that for?”

“Impertinence.”

“I’ll show you impertinence,” she said breathily.

“Since you aren’t cooperating, little minx, I shall have to teach you a lesson.”

“What kind of lesson?”

His eager pupil. Jude’s heart soared. He shucked his trousers while taking her in, then pushed her back against the bed so that her hair fanned out across the pillow. He settled himself between her thighs and took his time pressing kisses to the impossibly soft skin of her abdomen. She writhed deliciously beneath him.

“This isn’t your first time, is it?” he asked casually.

“Nor is it yours.” There was a defensive bite to her tone that told him to be careful with what he said next.

“How did you guess?” he gasped in mock horror. She exhaled a shuddering chuckle of relief.

“No, this isn’t my first time. Rest assured that I am not attempting to entrap you into an unwanted marriage.”

“As I have said, however clumsily, marriage is very much wanted.”

“Hm,” was all she said. Still unconvinced.

To persuade her further, he took a leisurely moment to explore the divot of her navel before draping her thigh over his shoulder and parting her glistening pink folds to find the nub at the peak of her center. He lavished attention there, driving two fingers inside her. Wet sounds filled the air. His cock thickened to the cusp of pain. He rutted against the bedclothes, seeking relief. Finding none.

Clarissa’s grip on his hair tightened. He bore down on the bundle of nerves with his tongue until her thighs trembled and her back arched in climax.

Satisfied that he had given her the first of many orgasms, he inched back up beside her and found her mouth. She kissed him without hesitation, squeezing his cock through his drawers.

Then Clarissa rolled him to his back and inched down, her hair fanning across his thighs. Jude propped his head on his bent arm so he could watch as she stroked his cock, tapping the head against her lower lip, her eyes bright with mischief through long dark lashes.

The sight of her pink tongue licking the bead of liquid welling in the slit jolted him. She was fearless, taking him into her mouth and sucking as far down as she could manage, which in all truth wasn’t very far. As if she could read his thoughts, challenge flashed and she pushed down, taking him deeper. His eyes rolled back in his head. He was enveloped by her wet heat. Her tongue swirled around the head again and he almost lost control.

“Off,” he commanded. “If you want this to go any further, you must stop doing that for now.”

Clarissa flicked her hair over her shoulder and straddled his hips. He tented his

fingers on her hip and held his cock steady while she sank down, her eyes fluttering closed and her lips parted.

“Very good,” he said encouragingly. He was a large man in every sense of the word, and he had learned the hard way that it was possible to hurt a woman by moving too quickly. Clarissa worked her way down over him, her tight sheath gripping his cock. “That’s it. You’re so fucking tight, Clara, you feel so fucking good.” He would call her Clara every time they were in private from now on. Give her a name that only he owned.

“You say such filthy things,” she gasped, arching her back and bringing her hips down until she was fully seated at last. Bending forward, she braced her hands on her thighs. The pose had the gorgeous effect of squeezing her glorious tits together. They bounced when she lifted herself up a few inches and slammed down.

“You love it when I tell you how the flush in your cheeks extends all the way to your breasts, don’t you? Or how gorgeous your tits bounce? I could watch you ride my cock for hours.”

“Yes,” she moaned. He pinched her nipple and gave it a light tug. Her abdomen undulated. He pictured it round with his seed.

“You’ll give me so many children, Clara. A dozen of them. Your body was made for fucking and breeding.”

She whimpered.

“You love it when I smack this splendid arse, don’t you?” He demonstrated with a sharp slap that made her flesh jiggle. Jude wanted a mirror to see the way his palm reddened her bottom. He wanted to watch himself sliding in and out of her glistening pink folds. He wanted to bury himself within her and let loose.

But he couldn't do that just yet. Somehow, he would have to find the strength to withdraw. He couldn't sully the ducal name with a child born out of wedlock. That was how inheritances got messy. He didn't want Pamela's greedy sons staking unfounded claims upon the title. His heir must be born in the proper order: first marriage. Then babies.

Her pace quickened. "I'm close, Jude."

"Yes, little minx. Ride me. Take everything you need."

She gasped and panted, arching back so her breasts were thrust high. The scene would be emblazoned into his memory permanently. "You're so gorgeous, Clara, my darling, take me, yes— yes ? — "

Her body tensed and her pussy clenched around him. Jude couldn't hold on any longer. When she was finished, he flipped her over without withdrawing, prompting a yelp of surprise, and rutted into her, pressing her into the bedsheets. Pleasure kicked up his spine, hazing his vision and pumping every drop of his seed deep inside her.

I shouldn't have done that, was his first coherent thought upon returning to himself. But laying with his head buried in the crook of her shoulder, inhaling her scent and cradled between her thighs, he'd never felt so content in his life. It would be all right. He would marry her. There was the small matter of the Royal Marriages Act, seeing as he was a descendant of King George II. If the capricious Priny refused his request to marry a woman of low birth, they would have to wait one agonizing year after giving notice to marry.

Twelve entire months of having to resist a temptation he hadn't been able to resist for one night. He was making a mess of his succession and he could hardly bring himself to care. Not with his arms full of Clara's soft curves and her heartbeat slowing gradually. He breathed in her soft floral scent and closed his eyes against the future,

basking in the present moment.

His worries dissolved when Clarissa brushed a kiss to his forehead.

“We should get dressed. This was lovely, but we cannot afford to fall asleep and be caught.”

“Why not?” He caught her wrists and pressed them into the pillow on either side of her head. “I see no reason why we must hide. We shall be married as soon as the matter of Harriet’s wedding is squared away. I will have a word with her rogue. If this is truly what she wants, then I will find a way to break the agreement with Lord Lucarran. That will give me enough time to secure Prinny’s permission to marry you. I am certain I can apply for a special license. A week from now, you’ll be my duchess.”

He let his weight press her into the mattress, savoring the feeling of her body beneath his.

“Wait. Permission? Duchess? What?”

She sat up, blinking at him in astonishment.

“I thought you’d be pleased.”

“Pleased to discover you’ve been lying to me all this time?”

“Lying?” He hadn’t lied. He just hadn’t said it outright. “You’re a clever woman, Clarissa. You had all the clues. I cannot believe you didn’t put them together. I swear I thought you knew.”

“I may be clever, but I’m not clairvoyant! How was I supposed to know you were a

duke? One does not simply encounter dukes in disguise at random villages in Cornwall. This is a disaster!”

She threw back the bedspread and dressed hastily, tripping in her attempt to pull on her stockings. She plopped into the chair and got them tied.

“I thought you were a gentleman of means. Not a duke. A duke is...”

“What, Clara?” Jude had managed to get his trousers on. He needed clothes. He wanted armor, but fabric would have to do. It was better than nothing.

“A calamity,” she finished. “I cannot be a duchess. Do you understand how much certain snobbish ladies of that set despised me by the time I had my final Season? I was too plain, too inelegant, and too smart for my own good. These women would be my peers.”

“Ignore them.”

She shot him a fulminating glare. “And when Bertram or his wife decide to inform the ton that I was stupid enough to lay with him before we had a marriage contract in place? What then?”

“Ignore them harder.”

Her wordless response of pure frustration coincided with a sharp tug on her lacings.

“Easy for you to say, Jude. But even if I could stomach putting myself in such a predicament, I will not marry a man who isn’t truthful with me about the most important aspects of his life. A duke,” she muttered as she slipped out the door, careful not to slam it despite her emotional state. “I never would have thought Mr. Montague could be a duke.”

Jude buried his face in his hands. He'd cocked this up completely, and he had no idea how to win her back.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Clarissa stormed downstairs to find her cousin.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” she demanded.

“Tell you what?”

A feral sound tore out of her throat. Men. They were all in cahoots.

“Your friend is no ordinary gentleman. He is a duke!”

“He finally got around to telling you the truth.” Nathaniel smirked. She wanted to smack it off his face. “Monty doesn’t like to use his title when he’s traveling. Or at any time outside of official business with the crown. He felt it was prudent to keep his identity a secret here, especially once Harriet was kidnapped. To protect her reputation, you understand.”

Clarissa pinched her temples. She couldn’t stop moving. Her entire body felt like a beehive, buzzing with anxious energy that had no outlet.

What Nathaniel said did make a certain amount of sense. She could see it. But she still didn’t understand why he had waited until his second proposal to tell her the truth. Her head was spinning to think she had received not one, but two proposals from a duke.

Hadn’t she been a stalwart helper from the very beginning? From the moment he’d

burst into Nathaniel's study she was ready to aid him in his quest to find his missing niece. She had been steadfast in her efforts, even to the point of risking her own reputation to help him.

Her thighs still ached from taking him like a thorough wanton, and she had enjoyed every second of their lovemaking, too—until he ruined it. One minute she'd been thinking about quaint country estates, landed gentry at most, but then he'd upended her wildest dreams by casually mentioning a title and vast estate.

Not just any title, either. The highest in the land outside of royalty.

If she married him, she would have to be presented to the queen. She would look ridiculous in court dress. Everyone looked ridiculous in court dress, but her flaws would be magnified and on full display. She could hear the room buzzing with gossip about her poor morals already.

A union with Lord Montague was unthinkable.

“I thought you would be pleased to discover you'd landed such a prize catch. Doesn't every woman dream of marrying a duke?”

She scoffed. “I have never viewed marriage as a competition for the highest-ranking husband.”

“I know. I'm sure that's part of why you appealed to him.”

“You're not taking this seriously,” she fumed. “I wanted a partner. A man I could talk to every day as a friend and a companion for the next fifty years. A man who loves children and wants to raise them with me. Not a man who is beholden to carrying on a lineage so loaded with expectations that his children are thrust into adult obligations from the cradle!”

“Don’t you think you’re being presumptive? This is exactly what Montague fears, you know. That people will make assumptions about what kind of man he is, and when he fails to meet them, think badly of the whole family.”

She crossed her arms and finally perched on the arm of the fainting couch. An undignified place to sit, for certain, but the fight was leaching out of her and she was suddenly exhausted.

“Perhaps I am being a little judgmental,” she grumbled, “but what do you expect when the man doesn’t trust me with the secrets of his heart?”

“You sound like Miss Turner. All starry-eyed with love and ready to fight to the death for it.” Nathaniel smiled, unbothered by her seething outrage. He could be annoyingly rational. She had always valued that aspect of him, until now.

“How is she, by the way?”

“Still determined to make her uncle see reason. Key, please.” She held out one hand, palm up.

“To what?”

“To your prisoner’s cell, obviously.”

“Why?”

“So that I can facilitate that conversation, Nathaniel. Now, hand it over.”

Reluctantly, he fished an old skeleton key out of his pocket. “This is the only one I have. The other is with Leacham. There is no jail in Cavalier Cove, so I told him his prisoner—not mine, to be clear—would be secure in my wine cellar. The previous

earl used to keep his fine clarets and brandy locked up so the staff couldn't steal it."

"But you don't keep large quantities on hand."

He shook his head. "Can't afford to. Don't you get up to any tricks with this."

"I only want to take Harriet down to see her beau while the Riders are in town this evening. Will they post a guard?"

"They said they would check on him after returning from their supper. I didn't offer them hospitality here, for reasons I know you understand and will keep to yourself."

"Mum's the word." She mimed locking her lips and throwing away the key. "I would never betray your secret. I expect you to tell any lady you intend to marry what you've been doing, however. Preferably before you propose."

She made a face and pocketed the key. Harriet lurked by the front door, watching the retreating backs of the Riders as they went into town for their supper at the Cock and Bull Tavern. Maggie would not be pleased to see them again.

"Now is our chance," Harriet whispered loudly. "Please. You have to help me free Rémy."

"I'll have a word with him," Clarissa said, though she had already promised herself that she would free him, if the smuggler didn't seem to be a danger. Guilt twinged within her. Mr. Montague would certainly repudiate her if she aided the young lovers.

Lord Montague, she reminded herself sternly.

They went down into the cellar together, taking the stairs as quietly as possible. One squeaked under Harriet's slight weight, so she made sure to avoid it.

A single candle inside a glass lantern illuminated the underground space. It was dry and clean, if mostly empty. Wooden boxes were stacked in one gated cell. Old furniture sulked in the dusty corner of a second cage. The previous Lord Prescott or one of his ancestors must have had an enviable wine cellar at one point.

Imagine what a duke's collection would look like . Immense. Vast. Intimidating. Like everything duke-related.

She shoved the thought away. The empty center cell was locked, and upon closer inspection, it was occupied by a man with tawny hair wearing a white linen shirt that had seen better days. A bruise graced his cheek. He scrambled forward to press his face against the bars when he saw them coming.

“What is this?” he said in better English than Clarissa had expected.

“We are breaking you out,” Harriet said breathlessly. “This is Miss Penfirth, Viscount Prescott's cousin. She stole his key. We're coming to save you!”

That wasn't quite a truthful accounting of what had happened, but Clarissa let it pass.

“Mon cher, I cannot allow you to do this,” the smuggler said, sagging back. Harriet seized the key and thrust it into the lock, ignoring him.

“I won't let them hang you.”

Hanging did seem a rather severe punishment for a man who had kidnapped a willing victim. Clarissa judged the handsome young man to be around her own age, late twenties. Any reservations she had about him being a violent threat disappeared when he took Harriet into his arms and stroked her hair. It was obvious from the way he held her that he cared about her very much.

Her heart ached.

She turned her back to give them a few minutes of privacy, as much as was possible when three people were milling about an empty cellar. This must be where Nathaniel stored his ill-gotten goods before he transported them to London. Incredible to think that a peer of the realm would deliberately undercut the Crown on taxes. How American of him, despite being French. Those rogues had tossed tea into a harbor and fought an entire war over having to pay tariffs on imported goods.

Very relevant to the present moment, Clarissa, she chided herself. Anything to avoid thinking about Jude. She ignored a sharp pinch of envy.

“—for your own safety, I must set you free,” Rémy was saying.

“Rémy Desmarais, stop being so self-sacrificing,” Harriet said indignantly. “I still want to marry you. Are you going to get out of that cell and make good on your promise to elope with me or not?”

“When you put it that way, marrying you is a far superior fate to a hangman’s noose.”

Clarissa bit back a grin. “If you have concluded your lover’s quarrel, we ought to be going. Quickly.”

They had been down here for too long. She waved the lovers toward the stairway and tromped up after them feeling like a lost puppy. Harriet’s squeak of surprise and the Frenchman’s muttered warning indicated that they had been caught.

But it was only Nathaniel.

“This is why you wanted my key,” he said.

“You can have it back now that he’s free.”

“Montague will be furious.” He cocked his head. All she could do was shrug, though even hearing his name made her heart hurt.

“There is nothing I can do about that. Harriet has made her decision. The question is whether or not he will honor it.”

Watching the lovers bolt down the drive under a rising moon brought a sad smile to Clarissa’s lips. If Jude loved her with such headlong passion, they might have had a chance together. But tonight, she had irrevocably broken it.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Jude bolted down the drive. His arms pumped frantically and his feet propelled him forward at a pace he hadn't attempted in at least a decade.

Harriet had sprung Rémy not half an hour ago. They'd left on foot, headed for the village, taking nothing but the clothes on their backs. The harsh words he'd spoken to Clarissa for her role in their escape chased him down the empty road.

I know what is best for my niece. You do not. How dare you let them go?

Miss Penfirth regarded him with calm sadness. It was Harriet's decision to make.

He'd roared, a wordless cry of pure fury, and dashed out into the night in pursuit of the wayward lovers.

The bright moon glared down at him, hung low in the clear night sky.

"I'll strangle that French bastard with my bare hands," he panted. The road sloped toward the village. He skidded around a curve and stopped short at the sight of a gleaming black coach stuck sideways in the road. Four horses were pulling in every direction but forward, hemmed in by a stone wall on one side and a deep ditch on the other. The crest painted on the door was familiar, as was the gray-headed old man hanging out the window, shouting at his beleaguered driver.

Old.

To Jude's eyes, the man had possessed a fatherly air. He was trustworthy. Respectable.

Now, looking at him through Harriet's lens, he realized two things: first, that the man he'd selected for his beloved niece's husband was nearly three times her age, and the reason he hadn't seen it sooner was that he was getting up in age himself.

Forty this summer.

His slowing pulse was a reminder that he was still in good shape for thirty-nine, no matter how much he was feeling his own mortality.

"Is that you, Montague?" the earl called out querulously. "I just saw your niece and a young man running toward the town. She said the wedding was off!"

He was about to apologize for dragging the man all this way when Lucarran climbed out and smacked one horse on the rump. It startled, lurched forward and almost overturned the entire coach, to the driver's consternation. Jude leaped in to help guide the horses out of the predicament they'd gotten into.

"Get in, lad. I have a bride to catch. I cannot allow her to slip through my fingers. The dowry is sufficient, but comely, obedient young ladies don't grow on trees. Harriet is ripe for the plucking." He grinned lasciviously and motioned for Jude to get into the carriage.

Lord Lucarran's rudeness was surpassed by his rank breath. Had the man never heard of tooth powder and daily brushing before? The way he was speaking about Harriet made Jude's skin crawl.

If he had made such an error of judgment in betrothing the girl he'd raised like his own daughter to this—this disgusting pig of the realm, what else had he gotten so

badly wrong?

Clarissa.

He should have trusted her not to be so venal as the women he had spent all of his adult life avoiding. He should have known that marrying for money alone was a recipe for an impoverished life indeed. Without affection, money was worth nothing.

All this time, he had been blind.

He was in love with Clarissa Penfirth.

Madly. Wholly. After only a few days of acquaintance, he had lost his heart to her.

He would go back to Prescott's and sort things out with her the minute this escapade was over.

"Women," huffed Lucarran. "Always thinking with their hearts and not with their heads. You'd better be right that she remains untouched. I won't raise a cuckoo's chick. Not in my nest." He clucked his tongue. "Any brat resulting from this alleged kidnapping will be sent away."

Cold horror coursed down Jude's spine. That was precisely what his family had done to Harriet when she was a baby.

History was repeating itself, despite his best efforts to steer his family onto a safer course.

The horses clattered into the courtyard where white feathers danced in the air, a clear sign of a recent disturbance. White birds hissed and honked warning. Harriet stood framed in the light spilling into the yard from the Cock and Bull Inn.

Why had they come back here?

There was no time for questions. Harriet and her roguish Frenchman ran into the taproom. The Riders had gathered here for a celebratory pint, and the none-too-sober men tripped over one another trying to chase their quarry.

Harriet and Rémy ran to the back, past the alcove with the secret passageway, into a closet. Jude followed them.

At the back of the closet was a second passageway.

“Clever misdirection,” he said.

“After them! We cannot let Le Fant^{me} escape!” shouted a ruddy-faced Leacham. Down they went, following the fresh sea air blowing in from the caves below. He wasn’t sure what he would do when they spilled onto the lip of the cave where he had spent a couple of hours getting to know Miss Penfirth.

If Harriet felt a fraction of what he did for Clarissa toward her French smuggler, then Jude had no business trying to stop them.

Fortunately, the runaway couple had a friend. Benoit, the dark-skinned American man whose home they had attempted to search, grinned widely as he pushed the boat toward the mouth of the cave with a long pole.

He gave a salute. Leacham reached for his pistol.

Jude put one hand on his back and sent the Rider tumbling into the shallow water before he could take aim.

“Godspeed,” he called to his niece, but they were already gone.

* * *

Jude tried to calm the raging Lucarran during the ride back to Prescott's estate, to no avail. The old codger railed against faithless women in general and Harriet in particular. By the time the tired horses dragged the coach up the sloping drive, he had given up hope of trying to soothe the jilted groom and sagged against the squabs with his eyes closed, contemplating his more immediate problem.

How would he make things right with Clarissa?

She was waiting for them when they strode in, her eyes brimming with reproach. She hung back while Prescott conferred with Lucarran and ushered him into his study for a fortifying drink.

He found her waiting for him on the stairway landing. She was sitting on the steps, reading. Calm. Jude sat beside her.

"Did they get away?"

"Yes. With a little help from yours truly." He smiled at the memory.

"I was afraid of what you'd do, after the way you tore out of here." Carefully she placed her bookmark between the pages and closed her book. "I wish them every happiness."

"Do you think it will work out for them?"

"I suppose they have as good a chance as anyone does. It is a gamble, isn't it? Marriage."

Disquiet filled his belly. "Is that a segue into asking whether I still want to marry you,

Clarissa?"

"No." She rose fluidly. Posing with her hand on the railing, she regarded him with somber seriousness. "I see now why you concealed your identity from me. People do treat you differently once they know you're a wealthy and powerful peer of the realm. It changed how I see you."

She hugged her book to her breast with one arm and broke eye contact, looking everywhere except at him as she delivered the coup de grace.

"When you were ordinary Mr. Montague, I enjoyed spending time with you. But now that I know what marriage to you would entail, I cannot forgive you for failing to tell me sooner. I let myself fall for you, hoping that I had finally met a man who appreciated me for the pleasure of my company. After seeing your reaction to Harriet's choice of husband, I know now that I was an unsuspecting fool."

He caught her hand to prevent her from sweeping past him up the stairs. "How so?"

"For you, marriage is transactional. Affection is a luxury. I cannot live that way, Jude. I told myself that if you let her go, it would mean that you had changed. Instead, you ran after her, determined to impose your will. Even if you did the right thing at the last minute, how do I know that you wouldn't attempt to assert your will over me? Even if you were granted permission to marry a woman so far beneath your station, I would be stupid to consign myself to a lifetime of unhappiness."

Heavy silence filled the room.

"I do respect you. Your intelligence. Your warm heart. You aren't a rash young girl." Tell her you love her, you fool. But the words would not come out. He was too devastated by her rejection to risk his heart now. He would keep this secret to his grave.

“Neither is Harriet.”

“I thought of her as a daughter. I don’t think of you the same way at all.”

She scoffed. “I should hope not.”

“Promise me that if there is a child you will reconsider.”

“In that case, I shall have no choice but to inform you. I do not believe in keeping children from knowing their own fathers.”

Relief coursed down him.

“One last kiss,” he pleaded. “To say goodbye.”

After a beat of hesitation, she nodded.

Gently, he cupped her face. Stroked her soft skin. Inhaled her scent before bending to taste her lips one last time. He could attempt to argue, but that would only make his stubborn Miss Penfirth dig in her heels more. He had an opening. He would pray with all his heart that his seed had taken root and she would be compelled to join him at the altar. For him, nothing had changed.

Either she would be his wife, or no one.

He poured all the emotions he couldn’t express into their kiss. He tasted her longing. Her regret. When they finally broke for breath, her resolve lingered on his tongue.

“Write to me,” he said, his voice rough with regret.

“I will.” She squeezed his fingers and let go.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ONE MONTH LATER

Dear Lord Montague,

I write to inform you that there is no need to marry in haste; the result of our mutual experiment in Cavalier Cove was null. You may pursue your duchess in peace.

-Clarissa Penfirth.

Dearest Clarissa,

I am devastated that you believe me capable of pursuing any lady other than yourself. If nature will not force the issue, may I pay a call upon you in London when I return there next?

-Lord Jude Montague

My Lord Montague,

I regret that I will not be in London next Season. I am traveling with my cousin Nathaniel to chaperone his new ward back to Cavalier Cove. Though I doubt our paths will cross again, I do wish you well.

-Clarissa Penfirth

* * *

Later that summer...

“We are passing near Acton Heath,” Nathaniel broke hours of companionable silence to inform her. “Would you like to see it while we’re in the area? I see no reason to come all this way and not do a bit of sightseeing.”

“I doubt Lord Montague wishes for me to trespass upon his property uninvited.” She hadn’t told her cousin what had happened with the duke, though she suspected he had guessed.

“Nonsense. The estate is open to the public. He won’t even know you are there. I would bet Miss Estelle would enjoy a visit, too.”

“She is but eleven, is she not?”

He scrubbed his face. “What am I going to do with a little girl? I know nothing about them.”

Clarissa shrugged. “Feed her, clothe her, educate her. Her father has provided a decent dowry for her. When the time comes, help her choose a suitable husband, assuming she wants one.”

“Strange that the Wayward Dukes wanted me, of all people, to take responsibility for her. She is his natural daughter, but born on the wrong side of the blanket. Why not a relative?”

“I’m sure we’ll get the story about that when we arrive.”

“Last chance to stop at Acton Heath in this direction,” he said. “The turn is just

ahead.”

A nervous buzzing like a swarm of angry bees erupted in Clarissa’s stomach. “Perhaps on the way back.”

* * *

The swarm in her stomach had dissipated sufficiently on the return trip that when Estelle, a bright eleven-year-old girl, pleaded to visit Acton Heath, Clarissa couldn’t say no. She was taking the transition in stride—better than Nathaniel was. Estelle befuddled and charmed Nathaniel with her antics, but it was her governess, Miss Lydia Shaw, who confounded him.

“Please, Shaw, can we?” Estelle begged.

“Ask Lord Prescott. It is his decision, my star.”

The girl all but threw herself into his lap, her gloved fingers folded in a pantomime of prayer, and gazed up at him like a puppy yearning for a scrap of supper from the table. Clarissa bit back a smile. She needed minding, but Miss Shaw—whom Estelle addressed exclusively by her surname—had laid a foundation of good manners that made her antics more winsome than annoying.

Mostly. After a single afternoon together, Estelle’s increasing wiggles and Nathaniel’s impatience colliding with growing frequency, Clarissa was forced to admit that a break from the coach was in order. When her cousin cast a look of exasperation at her, she immediately acquiesced.

“A brief visit to the renowned ducal estate would be a welcome reprieve for all of us.”

“Yay!” Estelle sat back, bouncing on the seat and clapping. Miss Shaw pressed one hand to her knee. The governess bore an unusually close similarity to her charge. Both had red-gold hair, snub noses, and green eyes. Clarissa was waiting for the right moment to broach whether there was a closer relationship between the two of them than teacher and pupil. Perhaps she would find it during their visit to Acton Heath.

They rolled down the long drive beneath a canopy of enormous oaks. Light dappled the road. The sun carried no warmth despite the lateness of the season. Clarissa had read that farmers were suffering crop failures due to the excessive cold, yet such worldly cares felt far away from this peaceful, prosperous place.

For the first time in weeks, she felt like she could breathe.

“I have never seen such a grand mansion,” murmured Miss Shaw. Clarissa sat straighter, twisting in her seat to get a better view.

“Regretting your decision?” Nathaniel asked. She smacked his arm lightly and sighed.

“To quote Austen, ‘Of this place, I might have been mistress.’” She sagged against the squabs. “It’s no use, Nathaniel. I would have been a terrible duchess.”

“Are you acquainted with the duke?” asked Miss Shaw.

“Slightly,” she mumbled as heat rushed to her cheeks. She fanned herself. “It’s rather close in here. I shall be grateful for a breath of fresh air.”

To her relief, the governess did not press the issue.

Inside the enormous mansion, they were greeted by the housekeeper who offered to give them a tour.

“Are you certain Lord Montague is not at home?” Clarissa asked apprehensively.

“He is inspecting the pottery factory and is not expected to return until tomorrow.”

A bolt of disappointment shot through her before she could guard against it. She had closed the door on any possible relationship with Jude, and she was not reopening it for a house, no matter how magnificent it was. Even if it did have beautiful ancient oak trees.

“What pottery factory?”

“There is a section of land on the far end of the estate that was naught but scrub land until fine-quality clay was discovered there. One of his first acts as a new duke was to open a clay pit and ceramics factory near the site. Today it employs over two hundred miners, artisans, and staff.”

Nathaniel cast her a sidelong smirk. She narrowed her eyes at him and stuck out her tongue.

“Miss Penfirth!” exclaimed Estelle. “That was very rude!”

“My darling star,” Miss Shaw admonished gently, through clenched teeth, “we do not chide our elders.”

“But she stuck out her tongue at Lord?—”

“Miss Shaw is a bit of a spoilsport,” Nathaniel said easily. The governess glared.

“Up the stairs on this landing you will see a portrait of the late duke’s family,” interrupted the housekeeper. Everyone fell into hushed attentiveness. “The Dowager Duchess of Montague resides near His Grace’s nephews, the sons of the girl in the

yellow dress. Until His Grace marries and produces an heir, Lady Pamela's four sons are next in line to inherit."

Clarissa studied the portrait. So this was Harriet's mother, albeit at a very young age. She estimated the girl to be around eight years old in the picture.

"Who are the other children?"

"Those are Lord Montague's three brothers and two sisters. None of them remain among the living, sadly. One died of measles, one of scarlet fever, the other sister in childbirth, and the eldest son passed in a tragic carriage accident, leaving the second son to inherit the title."

Clarissa gazed at the portrait solemnly. Not even immense wealth could protect children from deadly diseases or the vagaries of fate. Four children from one family, all dead.

A son who had never expected to hold the title left to shoulder all that grief and responsibility, tasked with cleaning up an irresponsible sister's mess.

She followed the tour with a heaviness in her heart that she simply couldn't shake. Despite so many personal losses, Jude remained a caring and thoughtful man, if generally suspicious of the world. She had been a fool to refuse him simply because she was scared of social censure.

Yes, she had experienced her share of cutting remarks from strangers and supposed friends who put a knife in her back. She, too, had allowed the world to make her cower in fear, but her personal losses had been mere trifles compared to what he had suffered.

Little wonder that he was so fiercely protective of his niece. His stubbornness was

born of wanting the best for Harriet, and in his world, a French smuggler was not anywhere close to acceptable. His intransigence was born of a deep-seated fear of losing someone he loved. In trying to remedy his only living sister's error, he had lost Harriet, too.

Yet instead of offering sympathy, Clarissa had chided him for not letting her go sooner.

She tried to swallow but emotion clogged her throat. Love. That was what she felt for the man who stared solemnly back at her from an oil painting. The rest of him had changed from childhood to an adult, but his eyes remained the same. She'd thrown away the one thing she wanted because she was afraid.

Now who was the fool?

"Clarissa." Nathaniel's touch on her arm brought her back to the present. "We're moving on."

They toured a grand ballroom, a dining room that could seat fifty people comfortably, and a library that made Nathaniel's look paltry in comparison.

"I could live in here," she whispered to him.

"You could have," he chuckled. "But you wouldn't lower your standards to marry a mere duke. No, my exacting cousin held out for a prince."

"Pfft. As if I'd even consider a prince." She waved a hand. "You're not going to let me live it down, are you?"

"Never. It's far too entertaining to tease you about it."

“Wait until your turn comes.” She grinned sweetly. “I vow to be positively merciless when you cock things up with Miss Shaw.”

All humor fled his face, which twisted into a scowl. “I’m not marrying a governess. I don’t even like the confounding woman.”

“Keep telling yourself that, Thaniel.”

He ignored her interruption. “Besides, I need an heiress. I should have gotten it over with years ago.”

“With that attitude I can hardly understand how you failed to attract a wealthy debutante.”

“I attracted them just fine, I’ll have you know. I simply didn’t want to marry any of them.”

They continued their friendly bickering as the housekeeper turned their group over to the groundsman for a tour of the gardens. Clouds darkened the sky overhead.

“We’d best make this a short visit. You’ll want to get to town before that storm breaks. To the pavilion and back.”

They wandered the well-cultivated rose garden and toured the garden maze, where Clarissa got so turned around she found herself separated from the rest of the group.

“Drat,” she muttered, contemplating how scratched up she would get if she tried to push through the hawthorn. Deciding against it, she took a turn, another turn, and suddenly burst out into an open field. This must be the opposite end of the maze from where she’d begun.

“Double drat.”

A fat raindrop landed on her cheek, somehow evading the brim of her bonnet to splash squarely onto her face. More followed it. Clarissa picked up her skirt and ran, skidding around the corner and darting as fast as she could to the end. Panting, she pushed onward, rounded the final corner and smacked into a wall of muscle. Strong hands gripped her upper arms.

“Miss Penfirth? What are you doing here?”

Thunder rolled overhead as she lifted her gaze and found Lord Montague scowling down at her.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 5:37 am

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“Jude! I mean, Your Grace, I...” Clarissa trailed off. Rain pelted down, plastering the duke’s hair to his skull and turning his cravat translucent.

“The rest of your party is indoors. The young girl said a lady was lost in the maze. I just arrived ten minutes ago. I rushed out to help. I never expected it to be you.”

Clarissa didn’t know whether to laugh, curtsy, cry, or all three. “My cousin?”

“They said another man was out looking for you. Prescott, I assume.”

She wished this reunion was taking place anywhere other than in a rainstorm. A streak of lightning split the sky and turned the whole world a sickly shade of green. The duke jerked his gaze skyward.

“This way. I trust your cousin had the sense to take cover by now.” Jude took her hand and dragged her toward a round white shape not far in the distance. Within seconds they were inside a pavilion. Rain poured down from the circular roof in a curtain of water. If she could stop shivering, Clarissa might have found the situation romantic. Instead, all she felt was wet, cold, and embarrassed.

No, scratch that. She also felt awkward and apologetic, yet at a loss for words to express any of it.

“I didn’t think you were due back until tomorrow,” she blurted out. “Thank you for coming to find me.”

“This isn’t the first time a visitor has gotten lost in that blasted maze. I ought to have it ripped out.” He shook his head like a dog, spraying droplets everywhere. She laughed and backed away.

“I wouldn’t have intruded upon your privacy if I had known you’d be home.”

“Clarissa. You are never intruding.”

Heat rushed into her cheeks. “I was so cold and dismissive when we parted. I cannot imagine you felt any desire to see me again.”

“Oh, but I did. Very much. In fact, I have thought of nothing else.” He took a single step closer to her, then stopped. “I think of you every minute of every hour of every day. As hard as I have tried to forget what an utter ass I was to you in Cavalier Cove, I find that only constant activity brings any degree of solace. If I can distract myself with work, I can briefly escape being haunted by my many failings. But as soon as I stop moving, it all comes rushing back.”

“You weren’t an ass,” she said in a rush of breath without flinching at his crude language. “Not to me.”

“I lied to you.”

“To protect Harriet.”

He met her gaze with eyes full of wary hope. The yearning she read there made her heart ache.

“I understand now, Jude, why you are reluctant to get close to people. You lost so much of your family. Tragedy after tragedy. I can see how it would be easier to hold everyone at bay. Besides, you couldn’t tell anyone who you really were without

exposing Harriet's true identity."

He shook his head. "That's not quite right. You're right about the source of it, however, protecting Harriet was only part of it. I loathe admitting to anyone that I am a duke. One day, I was an ordinary second son with chums at school. The next, I was called home and told I was a duke now, responsible for the welfare of what remained of my family. I lost friends over it.

"Thus, whenever I am presented with an opportunity to live as if I am not a peer of the realm, I take it. I don't like to be treated differently because of what I am. I was afraid to lose the easy rapport we developed so quickly. By the time things had progressed between us, I knew I had to tell you, but I messed that up badly."

"I could have reacted better," she said remorsefully.

"I spent weeks hoping you would fall pregnant. I cannot describe the state I was in after receiving your letter."

"Oh, Jude." She rushed forward. He caught her in a tight embrace. "I was devastated, too. I hoped there would be a reason for you to want me as your wife. When you asked to see me in London, I knew it would be too painful to watch you court other ladies. I thought it was best to make a clean break."

"How could you possibly think I would have courted anyone but you?"

His strong arms around her were a shield from the raging world. Sheets of rain poured down from the roof of the pavilion. Thunder and lightning dueled overhead, shaking the ground beneath her feet. There was nowhere she would rather be than here, pressed hard against his front, her heart beating as fast as a hummingbird's wings.

“I don’t know,” she confessed. “No one has ever wanted me enough to fight for me, Jude. It was impossible for me to imagine that a duke, of all people, would be the one.”

They both chuckled, an airless sound of sheer relief. Boldly, she twined her arms around his neck.

“That damned title gets in the way far too often,” he grumbled, then bent his head to kiss her softly. A question. One she answered by tilting her face upward for another, and another. More followed in frantic succession.

“Would you allow me to help carry the burden?” she asked in between kisses.

“I would make you my duchess a hundred times over, Clarissa.”

He fisted her skirts and shoved them high on her thighs. Cold air rushed up her bare legs. Her back hit a wooden beam supporting the roof. Water sprayed the back of her neck, the chill exhilarating. A sharp contrast to the heat of his body at her front. She threaded her fingers through his hair to anchor him to her lips. His rampant cock nudged her stomach.

Any lingering misgivings about becoming his duchess melted away. She could face any challenge for the prospect of having him like this, every single day. This love was a ferocious thing, clawing at her, insatiable for his touch. Nothing else mattered.

“I would give you so many heirs,” she panted as he shrugged out of his jacket and waistcoat. “Starting now.”

“There is still the issue of permission. I have sent an inquiry but have not yet heard back.”

“You asked about me even though I turned you down?”

He nodded. “I wasn’t giving up. I was biding my time.”

“Was this entire visit a setup?” she demanded, tossing aside her soaked spencer. It landed with a wet plop next to his outerwear.

“Yes, I specifically ordered the rainstorm. Atmospheric, don’t you think?” he deadpanned.

Clarissa laughed and hopped into his arms, trusting him to catch her. He did, with a grunt, and captured her lips in another devouring kiss. He braced her against the beam long enough to unfasten his trousers and slicked the head along her slippery center.

“Is it too early to start making heirs?” he asked in a tone that was a low roll of thunder.

“Never. After all, you are getting old to become a father,” she teased. “Forty, if I remember correctly? Did I miss your birthday?”

“It’s next week, minx.”

He entered her in a single thrust, pinning her like a butterfly to a board. She strained to take him, feeling herself stretch to accommodate his girth. His mouth was on her throat, sucking and nipping the delicate flesh. Need sizzled along her skin, her spine a lightning rod for the currents of desire racing through her. He withdrew and plunged forward again with a low moan.

“Yes,” she whispered. “Like that.”

He gave her everything and more. Pleasure rose until it overflowed her edges,

brimming with possibility. She loved him, for all his faults and flaws, just as he loved her.

“Be my wife, Clarissa, I beg you.”

“Yes.”

“Mine for always.”

“Yes,” she said again, barely a breath before the crest broke over her and she came, her back tense and thighs tight around his hips. His rhythm broke. Hot seed flooded her. Clarissa clung to him like he was life itself. The peak faded slowly. He withdrew and gently set her on the ground but did not let her go. He kept touching her wonderingly, as if he couldn’t quite believe she were real.

“You’ll really marry me?”

“Yes, of course. We went over that.”

“But I haven’t asked your father.”

“He’s dead. There is no one to ask. If it makes you feel better, my cousin has already implied he would grant his permission, should you seek it.”

“I did, back in Cavalier Cove. I ought to ensure he hasn’t changed his mind.”

The rain dwindled into a gentle mist. Such violent storms rarely lasted long. They stood side-by-side, watching the afternoon sun attempt to peek through the roiling clouds.

“Thaniel hasn’t changed his mind,” she said, squeezing his hand. They stood there,

gazing out at the grand estate that was their home, together, for a long time.

EPILOGUE

Clarissa had always believed in the saying marry in haste, repent at leisure. In the end, there was no putting it off. Theirs would already be a seven-month baby, when it was born. Waiting any longer would have shamed the family name, and Jude wouldn't stand for that.

On a bright, brisk day in October, they were married in the family chapel at Acton Heath. Estelle served as her flower girl. Harriet was unable to attend, being pregnant and living in France, but she sent a sweet gift of fine lace which Clarissa proudly wore on her wedding gown. Nathaniel and her entire family attended the ceremony, and the huge dining room was so full during the wedding breakfast that they had to scramble to find extra chairs.

Pamela and her four sons, however, ensured the day wasn't perfect. Unlike the illegitimate daughter she scorned, Pamela was self-centered and clearly thrived on male attention, which she did not receive enough of on her brother's wedding day. She pouted and preened, attempting to upstage Clarissa at every opportunity. Even the gown she chose to wear to the occasion was designed to command male attention.

Clarissa came away from their interactions with the conclusion that in a sad way, Harriet had been lucky not to be raised by Pamela. Her Uncle Monty had been far more of a parent to her than her birth mother.

Apart from dealing with her new sister-in-law, being a duchess wasn't nearly as taxing as she had feared.

Yes, the scrutiny from the scandal rags and speculation about how a woman of her advanced age and humble origins had managed to ensnare England's most desirable duke grew tiresome, but mostly, she had the luxury of largely ignoring them.

Once the guests were gone and the house had settled back into a semblance of normality, she made preparing for their baby her topmost priority. To keep her mind busy and get out into the countryside for beneficial exercise, she began a survey of land management projects underway and planned at the estate. Thus, by sheer coincidence, she found herself lying on a settee in Jude's massive library, one hand absently on her rounded stomach, reading about land management.

The couch and the library were different, and her morning dress was certainly an upgrade from the shabby pink one she had worn last summer when Lord Montague burst into Nathaniel's library. Otherwise, she was in almost the identical pose when her husband barged loudly into the library and disturbed her reading. Again.

"Why did you save the hedgerow?" he demanded.

"Is that what has you in such a huff?" She placed the ribbon in her book and awkwardly got up.

"No, stay put. You look very comfortable. I did order that confounded maze to be removed."

"But I have such happy memories of it." She stretched out one hand and wiggled her fingers. Grumpily, he took her hand and let her pull him down onto the sofa beside her. He took up almost all the available space. The scent of fresh snow clung to his hair. She ran her fingers gently through the soft strands. He laid his head on her stomach and closed his eyes.

"The maze is a liability. I instructed it to be torn out and replanted for spring."

“I did contradict you. Are you angry?”

“I was, for a moment. I’m not anymore.” He kissed the bulge of her stomach and lifted his gaze to meet hers. “They are only plants, after all.”

This was how most of their disagreements ended: with Jude distracted by his soon-to-arrive heir. She stroked his hair fondly.

“You know,” he said thoughtfully, “I never thought I’d be here.”

“In the library?” Clarissa teased, continuing to stroke his hair.

“No.” Jude sat up, his expression serious. “Married to a woman who challenges me. A woman who countermands my orders to the gardeners.”

“Oh.” Her smile faltered. “I didn’t mean to overstep. If you really want it gone, I’ll tell them to proceed.”

“Not yet,” he said quickly, brushing a kiss across her knuckles. “I worry that the hedgerow thorns will be a problem for a reckless toddler. I was musing about how grateful I am to have you. Even before I inherited the title, I was raised to expect obedience. And then I met you.”

Clarissa felt a flutter beneath her ribs that had nothing to do with the baby. “I’ve never been particularly good at obedience.”

“Except when you choose to give it.” He traced circles on her palm with the pad of his thumb. His knowing smirk sent warmth pooling between her thighs.

“I do delight in provoking you.”

“The most arrogant duke in England,” he grinned. “Who had the audacity to propose to you as if he were doing you a great service.”

“You were rather high-handed,” she agreed, unable to keep the smile from her lips.

“I was a fool.” Jude’s hand moved to rest over hers on her stomach. “A fool who nearly lost everything that mattered because of pride.”

The baby kicked then, as if in agreement, and they both laughed.

“Our child already has opinions,” Clarissa said.

“Like mother, like child.” Jude’s expression grew tender. “I’ve had a letter from London. The scandal sheets have finally moved on to fresher gossip—apparently Lord Huppence’s niece has eloped with her drawing master.”

“How deliciously scandalous.” Clarissa’s eyes twinkled. “I’m almost disappointed to be displaced as the subject of drawing room speculation. Especially by a lord whose name reminds me of hiccups.”

“I thought you hated the attention.”

“I did. I do.” She sighed. “But there was something rather exhilarating about being discussed in households across England. The spinster who ensnared a duke.”

Jude brought her hand to his lips. “It is I who remain your willing captive.”

A comfortable silence settled between them. Outside, snow had begun to fall, dusting the landscape with white. Clarissa watched the flakes dance past the window, thinking of all the twists and turns that had led her here.

“What are you thinking about?” Jude asked, his voice low.

“That life is rather like your maze,” she replied. “Full of unexpected turns and dead ends. Moments when you think you’re lost forever.”

“And then?”

“And then sometimes, when you least expect it, you find exactly where you’re meant to be.”

He shifted to face her, his expression suddenly serious. “Are you happy, Clarissa? Truly?”

The question caught her off guard. Not because she didn’t know the answer, but because she could see in his eyes how much her answer mattered to him. This powerful man, this duke who commanded respect wherever he went, was looking at her with such vulnerability it made her heart ache.

“I never imagined I could be this happy,” she said truthfully. “I had resigned myself to a different life entirely. A quiet life of independence, yes, but lonely too.”

“And now?”

“Now I have you. And soon, this little one.” She placed her hand over his on her stomach. “Thanks to you, I have a family, Jude. Something I never thought I’d have.”

His shoulders relaxed, and she realized he had been holding his breath. “Even with Pamela as a sister-in-law?”

Clarissa laughed. “Even with Pamela. Though I intend to continue avoiding her as much as possible.”

“I cannot imagine why. She is difficult, vain, and selfish.”

“You’re unusually harsh on your sister.”

“Because I know what a truly remarkable woman looks like.” His gaze was steady on hers. “I married her.”

The blush that rose to Clarissa’s cheeks made her feel like a girl again. How did he still have this effect on her? After months of marriage, after the intimacies they had shared, how could he still make her heart race with just a look?

“Your Grace,” she said playfully, “I do believe you’re trying to seduce me.”

“Is it working?” He leaned closer.

“Perhaps.” She tilted her head, pretending to consider. “Though I should warn you, I am not easily swayed by flattery.”

“No?” His lips were a breath away from hers now. “What are you swayed by, then, Duchess?”

“Actions,” she whispered against his mouth. “Not words.”

He needed no further invitation. His kiss was tender at first, then deepened with a passion that still surprised her. For all his aristocratic restraint in public, Jude had never been anything but ardent in private. It was one of the many contradictions about him that she had come to cherish.

When they finally parted, breathless, Clarissa caught sight of the falling snow again. “It’s getting heavier,” she observed. “We might be snowed in by morning.”

“What a terrible fate,” Jude murmured against her neck. “Trapped in this enormous house with nothing to do but keep each other warm.”

“Scandalous,” she agreed, threading her fingers through his hair.

“Speaking of scandalous...” He hesitated, then reached into his coat pocket. “I have something for you. An early Christmas gift.”

He produced a small velvet box. Inside was a delicate gold locket, oval-shaped and engraved with intertwining vines.

“Jude, it’s beautiful,” she breathed.

“Open it.”

Inside was a miniature painting—not of Jude as she had expected, but a tiny seascape of Cavalier Cove.

“So you’ll always remember where our story truly began,” he said softly.

Tears pricked at Clarissa’s eyes. “I thought dukes didn’t make romantic gestures.”

“This duke makes exceptions.” He fastened the locket around her neck. “For his duchess.”

The baby kicked again, more insistently this time.

“I think someone feels left out,” Clarissa laughed, placing his hand back on her stomach.

“Perhaps a bit squished,” Jude promised, addressing her belly. “I have terrible news

for you, young one. It will only get worse.”

Clarissa laughed. “That’s my grumpy duke. Ever the optimist.”

As twilight deepened outside the library windows and the snow continued to fall, Clarissa found she could laugh at herself for fearing this. She had worried about losing her independence, about being unable to live up to society’s expectations, about marrying in haste only to repent at leisure.

Instead, she had found a partner who valued her mind as much as her heart. A man who had given her not just his name and protection, but his respect and his love. The title? That was an afterthought. She knew she had given him the same sense of security and contentment. It wasn’t easy for a man who had lost so much to take a risk on love, but he had done it.

The fire crackled in the hearth, casting a warm glow over the room. Jude had moved to sit beside her, one arm around her shoulders as they watched the snow transform the gardens into a wonderland of white.

“I love you,” she said suddenly, the words escaping before she could consider them.

He turned to her, surprise flickering across his features. It was the first time she had said the words so plainly. She smiled and touched his lip with her forefinger.

“Especially then,” he agreed, kissing her forehead.

And as the snow fell outside and the baby stirred within her, Clarissa knew with absolute certainty that she had found her place in the world. Not as a duke’s wife, not as a mother-to-be, but as herself—Clarissa, who had followed her own path and found happiness on her own terms.

She had married in haste, yes.

But she would never, ever repent at leisure.

* * *

Thank you for reading *Secrets of a Duke's Heart*! If you enjoyed this story, please leave a review.

Next in the *Wayward Dukes* series:

A Duke For The Taking (Wayward Dukes' Alliance)

by Meara Platt

Upon her brother's passing, Harriet Comeford seeks out the Duke of Pendrake for help in finding a secure position for herself as a companion or as a governess in a respectable household. Harriet's brother assured her that he and the duke were soldiers in arms and brothers on the battlefield, so the duke will protect her as though she were his own sister. With her brother now gone, what does Harriet have to lose now that she is all alone in the world?

Maximillian, Duke of Pendrake, remembers Harriet's brother fondly and is not about to forsake his duty to a fallen friend. However, Harriet has arrived at his home just as a house party is about to get underway. Maximillian is in search of a wife, and every ton diamond present at his week-long party is hoping to catch his eye. But it is shy Harriet, who is staying on as his guest and doing her utmost to keep out of his way, that he cannot seem to get out of his thoughts. What if the best position he can secure for her is as his wife?

* * *

Read an excerpt from *The Pirate's Stolen Bride* .

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 5:37 am

Clarissa stood by the window, her bare feet pressed against the cool wooden floor, the silk of her nightgown whispering against her skin. The fire crackled low in the hearth, casting flickering shadows across the bedchamber walls.

Giggles.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 5:37 am

A CAVALIER COVE NOVELLA

Miss Harriet Turner lived life by the rules. How, then, had she ended up far away from everything she'd ever known, in a rough-looking tavern with a carved wooden sign out front bearing an image of a rooster riding a bull?

Her lips twitched into a smile before she schooled them into the placid mask of a woman who didn't notice cheeky, slightly off-color roadside signs.

The rough Cornish inn and taproom was no place for a lady. Technically, she wasn't one, which meant that Uncle Monty expected her to behave with even greater decorum than a real duchess, like her mother. Harriet cast a curious glance around the tavern. The village they had just driven through, Cavalier Cove, seemed as quaint as all the other ones they had passed on their journey.

This place, however, had a personality behind its charming exterior. The Cock and Bull Tavern where they had stopped to ask for directions was certainly...lively. The two men slumped over a wooden bench with tankards of ale set before them eyed Harriet and her uncle with suspicion.

Her uncle's thumped fist on the bar prompted her to wince. Not this again.

"No, we are not here in search of lodgings," Lord Montague, said with evident exasperation. "We want directions to Viscount Prescott's estate."

"Well, I wouldn't know anything about that, sir. Do I look like someone who hobnobs with toffs?" The girl behind the counter looked around Harriet's age,

perhaps a bit younger. She guessed around nineteen. “I’m only a barmaid, you know. Dunno nuffin’ about nuffink.”

Harriet bit back a smile at the girl’s exaggerated accent. This was not the first time her stuffy, aristocratic uncle had rubbed a less distinguished member of society the wrong way and gotten a stubbornly unhelpful response. She adored her Uncle Monty, but he had no idea how to interact with ordinary people—including his own niece.

Outside, a frightful honking drew Harriet’s attention to the window. Her amusement died instantly as three rough-looking men rode their horses straight into a flock of geese. The birds hissed and raised their wings menacingly.

If the birds didn’t like these men, then neither did she. Harriet always trusted an animal’s judgment of a man’s character. She did not always trust her Uncle Monty’s.

Her uncle dropped a coin on the counter and slid it across the scuffed wood with a grating scratch. Harriet winced.

“Find someone who does know,” he ordered. “Your father, for example.”

Harriet wanted to bury her face in her palm. She knew he was tired from their long journey, but this was not the way to get the information they needed. Once Uncle Monty got it into his head that a person wasn’t being sufficiently respectful, he would obstinately press the issue—even if there was no way for the other person to know he was a duke.

Uncle Monty loathed relying upon his title, especially when he was traveling. He believed it led merchants and innkeepers to overcharge him. Yet he still expected to be catered to like one.

Sure enough, the barmaid rolled her eyes and sauntered away, drying a tankard with a dish towel. But the canny girl’s attention cut immediately to the door when the bell

overhead tinkled jauntily and the three men strode in.

Her eyes widened, and she hurried away. The men drinking sat up straight and muttered to one another while casting dark glares at the intruders.

Interesting.

Harriet edged behind her uncle's broad back. His height and muscularity should deter these...highway robbers? But no, they bore insignia that looked official even though she couldn't quite identify it. Unease roiled her stomach.

As if she didn't have enough to worry about already.

"What is your business in Cavalier Cove?" demanded the clear leader of the trio, an older man with a nose that appeared to have been broken at least once. He stared down Uncle Monty with unyielding flintiness.

"I might ask the same question of you," he said, straightening to his full height to look down on the intruders.

Oh, dear. This wouldn't go well. She knew better than to try and speak up, but oh, how she wanted to try and stop him. Harriet had never been what you might call brave. She was used to being forgotten, overlooked, and otherwise ignored. Mostly, she preferred it that way.

"I am Patrick Leacham. We represent His Majesty's Waterguard. We're looking for a French smuggler. Goes by the name Le Fant?me."

"Scoundrels, the lot of them," muttered a female voice from behind her. Harriet turned to find the scowling barmaid had returned, without her father.

"Who are they?" Harriet asked softly.

“Riders,” the girl answered, as if that explained anything. “The Waterguard is part of the Customs and Excise office. The Riding Officers patrol the shore on horseback, and boat crews patrol near shore in smaller vessels. This lot has been after the Phantom for years. Especially that Leacham fellow.” She jerked her head at the leader. “Got a vendetta against him.”

Uncle Monty’s baritone rose. Harriet made a face. “I apologize for my uncle’s behavior.”

The barmaid laughed. “He can yell at the Riders all day long as far as I’m concerned. I’d rather have a smuggler for a customer than these fools. At least smugglers pay well and don’t threaten Pa.”

Lord Montague and the Riding Officers’ argument heated up. Harriet backed away with a long-suffering sigh. The other girl beckoned her behind the bar. “I’m Maggie,” she said.

“Harriet.”

“What’s a sweet girl like you doing with a toff like that?” she whispered.

“He’s my uncle. I am to be married. He’s taking me to Ireland.”

She didn’t mention that her uncle was a duke. Nor did she say that he was effectively getting rid of her after five failed Seasons. Harriet did not stand out. She was reasonably pretty but not what anyone would call a diamond of the first water. She wasn’t even a diamond in the rough. She was just boring, dependable Harriet Turner. A nobody, despite her elevated connections.

While she was capable of ladylike occupations such as singing, playing piano, and speaking a bit of French, she did so without demonstrating any particular talent, never mind enthusiasm. Her looks were passable, with straw-colored hair and wide hazel

eyes, but her freckles were a liability. In short, she had failed to attract a suitor, and Uncle Monty had thus found one for her.

Lord Montague had particular ideas about what constituted an appropriate match for a niece born on the wrong side of the blanket. She would have been content with a mere Mister with an adequate income, as long as he liked her company well enough. She was, after all, a merely adequate Miss.

But her uncle wanted her to marry well, and to him, that meant a title.

Titled men wanted titled ladies.

She was not titled. Her dowry, while generous for an illegitimate girl with few prospects, was not enough to tempt rich men to overlook her stupid freckles.

Nor was she a clever conversationalist. She was shy and quiet, an attentive listener, who had learned to keep her thoughts to herself.

Men weren't looking for wallflowers. They wanted fascinating, beautiful, clever brides with pots of money.

And so, Harriet had languished on the marriage mart for five long Seasons before being summoned to her uncle's study one day and presented with a choice: to marry the Earl of Lucarran, of Ireland, or remain at Acton Heath, Lord Montague's sprawling ducal estate, and accept that she was on the shelf. Forever.

She chose the first option. The Lucarran estate was situated to the southwest of Dublin, and she was assured that he spent most of his time in England, collecting rents as an absentee landlord. She had several opinions about this which left her uneasy about the match, but it was presented as take it or leave it, and despite her misgivings, she took it.

What else was she supposed to do? She longed for the security of a family and children. Even Harriet's own parents hadn't wanted her to exist. If not for Uncle Monty, who knew where her feckless parents would have left her. Harriet's mother had gone on to marry a marquess on the condition that no one must ever learn of her youthful indiscretion, and the lady had complied with the order by all but forgetting her first, unwanted daughter. Harriet could count on one hand the number of times her mother had visited.

Lord Montague, never one to back down from an argument with those he considered his inferiors—which, being a duke, was almost everyone—raised his voice yet again. The three Guardsmen raised theirs in response, punctuated by honking from the agitated geese outside. Tension crackled in the air.

That was when she saw him.

A man clinging to the shadows in the hallway behind Maggie. He observed the events playing out in the main taproom of the Cock and Bull with a glint of mischief in his eye. Seeing he had attracted her attention, he raised one finger to his lips and winked.

Warmth coursed through her, sweeping through her midsection and heating her cheeks. Harriet jerked her attention away, but she couldn't resist looking at him again.

"That's Rémy. He's the one they're after. But we won't let them catch him, will we?" the barmaid whispered.

Her pulse quickened at the thought that she was standing only a few feet away from a wanted criminal. A smuggler.

That didn't sound quite so bad, honestly. Considering the way Leacham and his Riders were threatening Uncle Monty she couldn't quite bring herself to feel too angry about cheating the Excise Officers. Times were hard after Napoleon's wars had

decimated trade. Didn't ordinary people deserve a bit of affordable luxury, too?

But smuggling was wrong, and she was one to abide by the rules. She ought to say something.

She watched this Rémy from the periphery of her vision. He was remarkably good-looking with longish brown hair the color of a sandy beach at sunset and high cheekbones. Suffice it to say that her husband-to-be did not possess the kind of mouth that was made for passionate kisses. This stranger did.

Oh dear. She was waxing poetic over a pirate. Harriet gave herself a little shake.

"There is no reason to resort to violence. I assure you I am not affiliated with the man you seek," said Uncle Monty. "You may not search my vehicle. I have rights."

"Prove it," sneered Leacham. "We know a toff like you is working hand-in-glove with Le Fantôme to transport smuggled goods. Am I supposed to take you at your word?"

It was the wrong tone to take. Uncle Monty's sharp features scrunched into a thunderous scowl.

"I'd better fetch Pa before this gets out of hand," Maggie said, and darted away.

Harriet chanced another glance at the smuggler. He caught her eye and smiled. A wave of heat started in her cheeks and rolled downward all the way to her toes.

Rémy pointed across the hallway. She gave a small nod to indicate she understood. He needed to escape, which meant he had to get across the way without being seen.

She ought to alert the Riders to his presence, but the geese hadn't liked them and therefore neither did Harriet. Nor did she appreciate the menacing way they

surrounded her uncle. Uncle Monty was starchy and sometimes got his dander up over inconsequential things, but he was a good man who had cared for her like a father. She didn't know Maggie well, but she trusted a local to know who was in the right.

Perhaps this Rémy person hadn't done anything wrong. They were treating her uncle like a hardened criminal, when he was obviously innocent of any crime, which did not inspire her confidence in Leacham's judgment.

She therefore did something so entirely out of character that later, she would hardly believe herself capable of it. She ambled back to the bar, pretended to stumble, and accidentally-on-purpose knocked the entire stack of tankards onto the floor. They hit the ground with hollow thunks and rolled underfoot, tripping one of the Guardsmen and dropping him onto his bottom.

Harriet clasped her hands over her ears, wincing at the noise.

From there, all hell broke loose. One of the men pulled his pistol and aimed it at Uncle Monty. A large man, presumably the owner of the Cock and Bull, with Maggie trailing behind him, shouting to get this lot out of my damn tavern this instant . The Excise Officers did not oblige him.

More tankards kept falling onto the floor, bouncing and rolling every which direction. Harriet danced backward several steps to avoid getting her toes smashed by a falling cup—until she backed right into another person.

An arm like an iron bar around her waist lifted her off the ground. Harriet squeaked. Her protest was muffled by an equally large hand clamped over her mouth. Her back pressed flush against a man's muscular chest. He didn't smell like the aristocratic men she was used to. She caught a whiff of salt and a hint of bay rum.

“Stay quiet. You're coming with me,” he said in accented English.

No, Harriet tried to scream, but Rémy dragged her into a closet and bolted the door from the inside. Before she could properly inhale, he tossed her over his shoulder and started down a staircase cut into the stone at the back of the room.

Unbelievable. She'd helped him, and he was kidnapping her!

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